

**WHERE MOVEMENTS MEET:
FROM THE WAR ON POVERTY TO GRASSROOTS FEMINISM
IN THE APPALACHIAN SOUTH**

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ABSTRACT

Jessica Wilkerson: Where Movements Meet: From the War on Poverty to Grassroots Feminism
in the Appalachian South
(Under the direction of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall)

This dissertation traces the alliances forged and the grassroots movements led by women in the Appalachian South in the 1960s and 1970s, with a focus on eastern Kentucky. With a wide variety of sources, including oral history interviews, archival film footage, memorabilia, local and underground publications, and manuscript collections, it shows how women shaped the federal War on Poverty in Appalachia and then used the skills they learned in antipoverty programs to foster social justice activism that continued in the 1970s and beyond. Women in Appalachia, who have seldom been seen as actors in the movements of the 1960s, were key leaders and foot soldiers in what contemporaries called the Appalachian Movement, which intersected with civil rights organizations and had its roots in the War on Poverty. Rural, poor and working-class women helped to shape debates about welfare rights, women's rights, and labor justice in the 1960s and 1970s, connecting white and black women, insiders and outsiders, to form a robust, interracial, intergenerational, and region-wide movement.

This dissertation makes two major contributions to the study of post-1945 America. First, by exploring how rural, poor, and working-class women in Appalachia—a virtually invisible group in U.S. history—organized in behalf of welfare rights, women's rights, and economic justice, it shows that the battle over welfare and rights in twentieth-century America was more diverse than popular narratives assume. Second, it challenges our narrow understanding of the modern women's movement in the United States by accounting for the gender-conscious

activism of working-class and poor women. Women in Appalachia built a movement that reflected the concerns of second-wave feminism and, at the same time, drew upon local traditions and addressed the particular experiences of women in Appalachia.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Paths to the Movement: Women’s Memories of Life in Appalachian Kentucky.....	22
Chapter Two: Women, Youth, and Coalition Work.....	58
Chapter Three: Movements for Poor People’s Rights.....	116
Chapter Four: Community Organizing in Eastern Kentucky.....	171
Chapter Five: Women, Labor, and Protest in Harlan County.....	220
Chapter Six: “The Whole Thing Comes Down on the Women”: Voices for Gender Justice in Appalachia.....	264
Epilogue.....	306
Bibliography.....	312

INTRODUCTION

As a college student in East Tennessee, I heard stories about women who in the 1960s and 1970s battled coal industries, marched on Washington, and fought against bitter poverty. I saw the documentary films *You Got To Move* and *Harlan County, USA*, in which women played crucial roles in local struggles for environmental and labor justice. I learned about the Highlander Research and Education Center, located just a few miles from my college, and about the women from Appalachia who had passed through its doors. Some had joined the civil rights movement; others stood on picket lines with the United Mine Workers of America; still others were the first women to break down gender barriers in industrial coal mines. I heard Florence Reece's "Which Side Are you On?" and other songs women activists wrote and sang. I read their life histories in edited volumes. Eventually I heard their stories recounted in oral history interviews.¹ These stories came to me in fragments, crumbs that I have followed for over a decade and that brought me to this study.

There was no shortage of women's progressive activism in the Appalachian South in the 1960s and 1970s. While there have been plenty of scholarly and popular references to their efforts, with a few exceptions they have been woefully under-studied. *Where Movements Meet: From the War on Poverty to Grassroots Feminism in the Appalachian South* examines the social movements that arose and converged in the Mountain South, with a central focus on women's

¹ See *You Got to Move*, Cumberland Mountain Educational Cooperative, directed by Lucy Massie Phenix and Veronica Selver (Harrington Park, NJ: Milliarum Zero, 2009), DVD; *Harlan County, USA*, Criterion Collection, directed by Barbara Kopple (NY: Cabin Creek Films, 2006), DVD; Kathy Kahn, *Hillbilly Women* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973).

involvement. This is a history of the women's networks that mobilized during the War on Poverty and helped to sustain campaigns for social justice for over a decade.

This study begins by providing a historical backdrop, drawing upon the life histories of two women who grew up during the quickly changing world of the twentieth century and went on to lead grassroots campaigns in the mountains. It then weaves together women's life histories and their involvement in major events in the long 1960s. I argue that when President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty targeted the Appalachian South beginning in 1965, women saw a unique opportunity to route resources to the needs of their families and communities and to gain a political education. After the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 with its call for "maximum feasible participation" of the poor, women in Appalachia, like women in poor communities across the country, flocked to antipoverty programs as staff, volunteers, and community organizers.² They made sure that antipoverty programs addressed issues particular to the region, such as high rates of unemployment, the need for robust public assistance, and barriers to health care and education because of their rural location. In recent years, scholars have shown how urban black women took the reins of many antipoverty and community programs, turning them into more effective organizations, and how they shaped nationwide policies on poverty. My study builds on the growing body of historical evidence that federal initiatives provided openings for women to enter into new political debates and become voices

² See Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Robert Bauman, "Gender, Civil Rights Activism, and the War on Poverty in Los Angeles," and Adina Back, "Parent Power: Evelina Lopez Antonetty, the United Bronx Parents, and the War on Poverty," in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History*, ed. Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2011); Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina, 1940-1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Nancy A. Naples, *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work, and the War on Poverty* (New York: Routledge, 1999). See also Annelise Orleck's discussion of "motherist politics" in the War on Poverty in "Introduction: The War on Poverty from the Grassroots Up," in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History*.

for change in their communities. At the same time, the stories I uncovered also offer a new and important piece of this history, showing how place, race, and class shaped rural women's activism and influenced their grassroots work as well as their efforts to reform poverty policies.

Following women's activities and tracing their alliances, I discovered not only that women sustained antipoverty programs as they came under increasing attack in the late 1960s, but also that they continued to mount a diverse array of campaigns that addressed the complex ways that class, gender, and race disparity played out in the region. Thus antipoverty activism set in motion a series of campaigns, local and regional, that continued well into the 1980s. Galvanized by the War on Poverty, women fostered diverse coalitions and crisscrossed 1960s and 1970s social movements as they became leaders and foot soldiers in a regional welfare rights movement, a community health movement, unionization campaigns, and a grassroots women's movement.

In the spring of 1964 Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson headed to West Virginia and eastern Kentucky for a tour and media campaign to promote War on Poverty legislation. In the rural town of Inez, Kentucky, tucked away in the coal fields of Appalachia, reporters captured Johnson's visit with Tom Fletcher, a white unemployed coal miner and saw mill worker who struggled to provide for his wife and eight children. The now iconic image shows Johnson crouched on the porch, with Fletcher and three of Fletcher's young sons surrounding him, representing two generations of men that Johnson targeted with his anti-poverty programs.³

³ The most popular of the photographs was taken by Walter Bennett for *Time & Life* and captured President Lyndon Johnson's visit to Tom Fletcher's home in Kentucky as part of his tour of poverty stricken areas in the U.S. Photo by Walter Bennett, *Time & Life* Pictures/Getty Images.

Speaking from Fletcher's porch, Johnson declared that he intended "to work every way I can, as long as I can, to wipe out poverty in the United States." He cited the high unemployment rate in Inez—three out of ten men could not find work—and stated that he did not "want men to sit idle because coal mines are idle" and wanted to help put men to work.⁴

It is no accident that this image came to represent the War on Poverty. The White House selected the Fletcher family, and Tom Fletcher specifically, for this purpose as part of Johnson's campaign to win southern Democrats over to his policies. The image and words of Tom Fletcher, who told the president he longed to provide a better life for his family, sidestepped issues of black civil rights and welfare for single mothers and emphasized the image of a strong mountaineer with his intact, traditional, and white family. Fletcher was a hard-working father in a mythologized place—Appalachia—who happened to be poor. For those seeking to demonize the War on Poverty, this image was of little use. At the same time, it fit easily into a string of recent news reports and books that revealed severe poverty hidden within a supposedly affluent America, with Appalachia as an especially resonant case.⁵ Kentucky lawyer and activist Harry Caudill became the voice of the mountains, offering a disturbing portrait of eastern Kentucky, where industry had plundered the coal and timber riches of the mountains and left the inhabitants of the region poor and dependent. His 1963 book *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* paired easily with Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, which included descriptions of impoverished whites in Appalachia and charged that American poverty had become invisible in the era of post-war affluence. Following the publications of these books, journalists flocked to the mountains.

⁴ "Guidelines, Remarks at Inez, Kentucky," Box 39, Folder poverty trip #1, part 2, Office Files of the White House Aides-Moyers, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX (hereafter LBJ Library).

⁵ For analysis and commentary on this image, see Annelise Orleck, "Introduction," in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History*, 1-28, 2-3; Pam Fessler, "Kentucky County That Gave War on Poverty A Face Still Struggles," Morning Edition, National Public Radio, January 8, 2014; Allen G. Breed, "Poster Father Weary of Sour Fate," *LA Times*, June 26, 1994; Ronald D. Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 81-82.

New York Times writer Homer Bigart was among them, and his series on Appalachian poverty, along with Caudill's and Harrington's books, caught the attention of President Kennedy and helped to plant seeds for the antipoverty programs that Johnson implemented once he took office. Despite entrenched poverty in many other parts of the country and the antipoverty programs' wide reach, from Indian reservations to black urban ghettos, Johnson and his aides made the Appalachian South the stage setting for the War on Poverty.⁶

The Appalachian South as a place and as an idea became central to the unfolding War on Poverty for several interconnected reasons. First, the mountains occupied a mythic place in the American imagination.⁷ In his speech after the signing of the Appalachian Regional Development Act, Johnson stated that "no region has contributed more to the shaping of our history," and he drew upon the story of white settlers who conquered the Appalachian Ranges to find their way "to the promise and the plenty of a continent that is united." As he gestured to this pioneer history of Appalachia, Johnson also recognized the wealth disparity that had come to define parts of the region, where family poverty rates were double the national average. Affirming his commitment to "human dignity and decency," he called on state and local governments to implement legislation to ease poverty in "this old and this honored region."⁸ Even though Appalachia's diverse population included African Americans and an array of ethnic groups, Johnson and his aides used Appalachia as a way to shift the focus to whites and mitigate

⁶ See "War on Poverty: Portraits from an Appalachian Battleground, 1964," *Time and Life* Pictures/Getty Images, <http://life.time.com/history/war-on-poverty-appalachia-portraits-1964/#1>, accessed February 3, 2014; Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); Harry Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963); Homer Bigart, "Kentucky Miners: A Grim Winter," *New York Times*, October 19, 1963; Michael L. Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.

⁷ See Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia On Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978).

⁸ Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks Upon Signing the Appalachia Bill," March 9, 1965, digitized by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=26801>, accessed February 3, 2014.

charges that the War on Poverty would disproportionately target and serve African Americans. As one member of a War on Poverty task force explained, “We were concerned that the public would think that this was a program for black kids, for ghetto kids. So we emphasized in all our speeches that there were hundreds of thousands of young people trapped in the hollows of Appalachia or in other rural areas, and that this was not just a black program; it was a white and black program.”⁹

This study probes the assumption that white, male mountaineers embodied the Appalachian region. That assumption has defined how historians and politicians alike have thought and written about the Appalachian South. As sociologist Barbara Ellen Smith argues, the very concept “Appalachia” has been constructed around white men’s experiences and has ignored gender dynamics in the region. Smith states, “Generic ‘mountaineers,’ ‘settlers,’ and ‘Appalachians’—most of them implicitly male—crowd the pages of the classic texts on the region. Fashioned from Adam’s rib, ‘mountain women’ are secondary, entirely compatible with the ‘mountain men’ from whom they are derived. Female agency (other than active support for her mountain community or her mountaineer), sexism, gender trouble—all the basic stuff of women’s history—are literally inconceivable.”¹⁰ I put women at the center of twentieth-century Appalachian history, showing how they stood at the forefront of local antipoverty movements, worked in alliance with outsiders, and participated in interracial campaigns. By examining the processes by which they joined movements, I show that gender mattered in how they understood themselves as members of their community and region, as part of the working class, and as participants in social movements. Moreover, I show that gender was fundamental to shaping

⁹ *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*, 118.

¹⁰ Barbara Ellen Smith, “Beyond the Mountains: The Paradox of Women’s Place in Appalachia,” *NWSA Journal* 11.3 (1999): 2.

individual experience of poverty and inequality in rural mountain communities and single-industry coal fields. Women faced distinct challenges as they cared for children and the disabled, supported unemployed husbands, sought health care, navigated the welfare system, confronted domestic violence, and pursued wage work.¹¹ As this study examines elements of women's personal lives, how they navigated a world of limited options, and the gendered process by which they joined social movements, it also chips away at "the monolithic constructs of Appalachian history."¹²

I also ask how the knotty intersection of class and race in 1960s Appalachia influenced social movement activism.¹³ The civil rights movement sparked debates about economic justice. By the spring and summer of 1964, white civil rights activists who had focused on the Deep South turned their attention to white working-class communities, drawing explicit links between the War on Poverty and the civil rights movement.¹⁴ Many young white activists joined the antipoverty programs in the Appalachian South, where they hoped to build on a legacy of union

¹¹ I draw on Lisa Levenstein's concept of a "multidimensionality of poverty" in women's lives. See Lisa Levenstein, *A Movement Without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 4-5.

¹² Smith, "Beyond the Mountains: The Paradox of Women's Place in Appalachia," 2. Since Smith's article, quite a few studies of women in Appalachia have been published, yet there have been relatively few historical studies. See Helen M. Lewis with editors Patricia D. Beaver and Judith Jennings, *Helen Matthews Lewis: Living Social Justice in Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012); Mary K. Anglin, *Women, Power, and Dissent in the Hills of Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Suzanne E. Tallichet, *Daughters of the Mountain: Women Coal Miners in Central Appalachia* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006); Helen M. Lewis and Monica Appleby, *Mountain Sisters: From Convent to Community in Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002); Barbara Ellen Smith, ed., *Neither Separate nor Equal: Women, Race, and Class in the South* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); See also the special issue on women, *Appalachian Journal* 37 (Spring/Summer 2010).

¹³ On Appalachia, race and class, see the special issue of *The Journal of Appalachian Studies* 10 (Spring/Fall 2004). See especially Barbara Ellen Smith, "De-Gradations of Whiteness: Appalachia and the Complexities of Race," 38-57.

¹⁴ See Kieran Walsh Taylor, "Turn to the Working Class: The New Left, Black Liberation, and the U.S. Labor Movement, 1967-1981" (PhD diss, UNC-Chapel Hill, 2007); Gordon Mantler, *Power to the Poor: Black-Brown Coalition and the Fight for Economic Justice, 1960-1974* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

activism and contribute to an “Appalachian Movement” that would extend the promises of the civil rights movement. The black freedom struggle also provided for moments of exchange between blacks and whites who organized around issues of economic inequality, most notably during the lead-up to the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

At the same time, local whites identified the importance of class difference in their lives and perceived how that difference created a series of barriers to upward mobility. Some went on to identify common class goals and join interracial alliances. While African Americans were a small minority throughout much of the Appalachian South, many of them were eager participants in antipoverty programs. Sometimes they worked in alliance with white community members, finding ways to make the antipoverty programs more useful to their communities. Other times they were part of self-conscious interracial campaigns, especially as a welfare rights movement arose across Appalachia. I have made a point of highlighting these moments of interracial coalitions to counteract the narrative of Appalachia as “white” and to gesture towards the spirit of cooperation that emerged as communities came together to improve poverty policies.¹⁵

In the late 1960s and 1970s, commonly held ideas about the causes of poverty came under scrutiny. Drawing from culture-of-poverty models prevalent in post-war America, political economists argued in sweeping terms that “the mountaineer” lacked the culture and skills to live and work in modern America. The problem, they implied, lay with Appalachian culture, not in

¹⁵ For other examples of interracial, anti-poverty campaigns in the 1960s see Mantler, *Power to the Poor*; Jennifer Frost, *An Interracial Movement of the Poor: Community Organizing and the New Left in the 1960s* (New York: NYU Press, 2001); Christina Green, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005); and Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

economic structures or systemic inequities.¹⁶ Kennedy's regional commissions and Johnson's War on Poverty measures were influenced by culture-of-poverty theory, which called for an acculturation of poor people through a series of programs that would teach them the skills and habits to succeed in modern society. Federal programs also reflected modernization theory, or the scientific management of economic growth and capitalist development in the mountains. These explanations and solutions for poverty quickly were probed by antipoverty warriors. As activists and poor people flocked to antipoverty agencies, they analyzed the structural conditions of poverty and questioned market-oriented solutions, remaking the War on Poverty at the grassroots level.

Histories of Appalachia written since the 1960s represent a backlash against derogative depictions of Appalachian culture perpetuated by culture-of-poverty theories. Many of the studies were written by scholars who worked in social justice and community organizations in the region and were involved in early efforts to establish Appalachian Studies. They were on the frontlines of War on Poverty community action agencies, movements for the abolition of strip mining, and fights for union democracy. Unlike many of the development theorists who guided the government's programs in Appalachia, the activists-turned-scholars were influenced by dependency theories that held currency in the 1970s and 1980s, and they questioned the view of modernization that underpinned federal involvement in Appalachia. The historiography that developed out of early Appalachian Studies countered pejorative images of Appalachia with structural materialist analyses of poverty, most often arguing that Appalachia functioned as the

¹⁶ Anthropologist Oscar Lewis outlined the theory of culture-of-poverty in *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1959). Various scholars and policy makers applied this theory, including, in the Appalachian case. See Jack E. Weller, *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965). Criticisms of this theory from Appalachian scholars can be found in Helen M. Lewis, Linda Johnson, and Don Askins, ed., *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case* (Boone, NC: The Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978). For more recent scholarly analysis, see Dwight B. Billings and Kathleen M. Blee, *The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

periphery to the Northeast metropole. The War on Poverty, some argued, too often reinforced that relationship.¹⁷

It has been four decades since the War on Poverty sought to invigorate Appalachia's economy and communities, and with distance from controversial policies, scholars have begun to ask new questions. For instance, Ronald D. Eller has offered invaluable insight by weaving together a legislative and policy history of the Appalachian War on Poverty with the grassroots movements that it helped to generate. I build on Eller's analysis, but I also consider how the narrative changes when we place women and gender at its center and consider the War on Poverty from their viewpoint. By spotlighting women's activism and their relationship to the state, I examine how women used community programs to address the particular needs of women and children. Moreover, I uncover how their activism in War on Poverty programs anticipated later involvement in welfare rights and women's movement activities.¹⁸

A focus on women and their relationships and coalitions led me to question the insider/outsider framework that has been widely accepted in the study of the Appalachian War on Poverty.¹⁹ Appalachian Studies scholars have long focused on a legacy of missionary work in Appalachia, dating to the early twentieth century, in which outsider reformers and missionaries characterized mountain dwellers as "yesterday's people" who were poor in part because they refused to adjust to modern society. Scholars have lumped these missionaries together with the

¹⁷ See Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1982); John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); Helen M. Lewis, "Fatalism or the Coal Industry?," *Mountain Life and Work* 46, no. 11 (1970): 4-15; Lewis, Johnson, and Askins, eds., *Colonialism in Modern America*; and David Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer: People, Power, and Planning in Appalachia* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994).

¹⁸ See Ronald D. Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945* and Robyn Muncy, "Coal-Fired Reforms: Social Citizenship, Dissident Miners, and the Great Society," in *Journal of American History* 96 (June 2009).

¹⁹ Smith, "Beyond the Mountains," 1-17; Barbara Ellen Smith and Stephen L. Fisher, "The Place of Appalachia," in *Southern Spaces*, January 31, 2013, http://www.southernspaces.org/2013/place-appalachia#footnote2_8ya8bck.

antipoverty workers of the 1960s and 70s, suggesting that mountaineers never trusted the War on Poverty or the outsiders and that cultural insensitivity on the part of outsiders undermined the antipoverty programs. This insider/outsider framework ignores the fact that many volunteers were local people; it also blinds us to the dynamic coalitions that characterized antipoverty work. As historians Jim Leloudis and Robert Korstad state, “eradicating poverty requires alliances” and “an effort to create human relationships that bridge our differences and turn them into sources of strength rather than alienation.”²⁰ My study shows how women built a multi-dimensional movement that relied on strong alliances between outsiders and locals, and forged both regional and national connections. Local people in Appalachian hamlets invited antipoverty workers to live with them and to share meals. Together they organized meetings, decided on goals, and imagined a more democratic and just society. Many local volunteers were forever changed by the movement; many committed their lives to public service. In sum, the narrative of insider/outsider gives short shrift to the melding of ideas and people in the Appalachian South in the 1960s.

A focus on insider/outsider relationships has led some historians of the Appalachian War on Poverty to focus on internal conflicts in antipoverty organizations and to conclude that by the end of the 1960s, organizations had failed due to political infighting. Yet, antipoverty programs came under sustained attack by local and state officials, many of whom mounted a red-baiting campaign that crippled some organizations and led to painful infighting. Moreover, a myopic focus on conflict disregards broader economic and political forces, most importantly the slow death of the coal industry, and the Vietnam War, which funneled resources away from federal poverty programs. Yet, despite these challenges, the movement for economic and social justice in Appalachia persisted.

²⁰ Robert K. Korstad and James L. Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs: The North Carolina Fund and the Battle to End Poverty and Inequality in 1960s America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 355.

Scholars of Appalachia have not been alone in their critiques of the War on Poverty. In the 1980s conservatives who had staked their political careers on the failure of antipoverty programs took office, and they shored up the narrative that the antipoverty programs had failed. Historical studies, sometimes unintentionally, reinforced this narrative. Even as many scholars acknowledged the potential of antipoverty programs, they tended to analyze the inability of Johnson to deliver on his promises and the ways in which racism and sexism hindered the War on Poverty.²¹ As historian Annelise Orleck argues, while those studies are important and useful to students of public policy, they have reinforced “the widespread belief that the War on Poverty had been a complete and abject failure,” ignoring the positive legacies of the programs.²² Moreover, such an argument, built on an impossibly high standard for success, has written a generation of activists out of history. Avoiding claims of complete success or failure, I add to a growing body of scholarship on how local communities responded to, took advantage of, and helped to shape antipoverty programs at the local and regional level.²³

This study also contributes to the history of working-class and poor women’s activism in the post-1945 United States.²⁴ Historians such as Annelise Orleck, Laurie Green, and Rhonda Y.

²¹ Orleck, “Conclusion,” *The War on Poverty*, 450-451.

²² Ibid, 451.

²³ See Orleck and Hazirjian, ed., *The War on Poverty*; Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace*; Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*; Martha J. Bailey and Sheldon Danziger, ed., *Legacies of the War on Poverty*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013); Crystal Sanders, “To Be Free of Fear: Black Women’s Fight for Freedom Through the Child Development Group of Mississippi” (PhD diss, Northwestern University, 2011); Robert Bauman, *Race and the War on Poverty: from Watts to East L.A.* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008); Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry It On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

²⁴ This study is part of a wave of scholarship that is rewriting the history of post-1945 social movements, with gender integrated into the analysis. In her study of black and white women’s civil rights and antipoverty activism in Durham, North Carolina, Christina Greene writes that “analysis of women’s activism suggests new ways of understanding protest, leadership, and racial politics.” See Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 5. Green’s work is part of an outpouring in African American women’s history and the civil rights movement, which has provided models for this study. See Laurie Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace*; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the*

Williams have shown how poor, urban, black women fought for basic necessities and welfare rights at the same time that national debates were raging about the relationship of poor, black women to the state.²⁵ My dissertation puts new figures on the national stage. By examining rural, working-class and poor women's involvement in community organizations, I provide a fuller picture of how national developments, including the social movements of post-World War II America and the state's response to poverty in the 1960s and '70s, played out at the local level. Moreover, constructing my study around women's stories allows me to write against the familiar images of the poor as parasitic and maladaptive that continue to influence how we see the past and make choices in the present. Histories of black women's activism challenge the stereotypes produced by white politicians and social scientists, which have vilified black women and characterized them as undeserving wards of the state. My study of white, low-income women in the mountains and the interracial alliances they joined counters the stereotypes that equate poverty with black women and shows how whites and blacks found common ground as they grappled with the structural forces that shaped their experiences of poverty.

Countless books, reports, and articles over the last thirty years describe women who live in poverty and point out that women make up a disproportionate percentage of the poor population in the present-day United States, but too often those studies are disconnected from the

Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013); Temma Kaplan, *Crazy for Democracy: Women in Grassroots Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Constance Curry, et al., *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000).

²⁵ See Levenstein, *A Movement Without Marches*; Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace*; Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

history of poverty and antipoverty movements. The fact that women are over-represented among the poor begins to seem inevitable, rather than one of the effects of gendered social and class constructs. My work examines dimensions of poverty over women's lifetimes, thus capturing the complexities of as well as continuities and changes in poverty over the twentieth century, and it shows the various ways in which women sought ways to end poverty in their communities.

Illuminating women's experiences in the rural and mountain South also allows me to see the American women's movement in new ways. I argue that as women took up community-based, anti-poverty efforts and forged cross-class, -race, and -generational alliances, they began to speak out about the gender-based oppression in their lives. Local antipoverty efforts thrust them into intricate struggles for power and taught them invaluable lessons in the art of democracy. Their struggles against what theorist Nancy Fraser calls "injustices of distribution" led to a regionally-specific form of "grassroots feminism," as they connected their positions as women to their experiences in the coal fields, as mothers, workers, wives, and caregivers.²⁶ As antipoverty activist Eula Hall put it, "In Appalachia, there is nothing worse than being poor and a woman."²⁷ Yet "second wave" feminism in the United States has primarily been cast as a middle-class, urban movement that made few real inroads in the South. On the contrary, gendered struggles in rural communities in the Mountains included labor disputes, poverty, and environmental destruction that affected women in particular and profound ways. A close study of these struggles shows us how place, class, and gender entwine in women's lives and influence how women participated in democratic social movements.²⁸

²⁶ Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (New York: Verso, 2013), 214-215.

²⁷ "Eastern Kentucky Women," *Mountain Life and Work*, April 1975.

²⁸ Recent historians of the women's movement have brought to attention that there could never be a single type of feminism; there are as many feminisms as there are experiences of being a woman. See especially Nancy Hewitt's

This study is in part an answer to the call for more dynamic and robust histories of the 1960s movements and their legacies. In “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past” Jacquelyn Dowd Hall encouraged historians to tell a more expansive story of the civil rights movement and the ways that it influenced activism well into the 1970s and 1980s. She urged historians to think “beyond decline” and to explore the “lasting social revolution, as thousands of ordinary people pushed through the doors the movement had opened.”²⁹ Van Gosse called for a return to the framework that activists had used themselves to understand the social upheavals of the 1960s: a “movement of movements,” or “a constant efflorescence of sub-movements, temporary coalitions, breakaway factions, and organizational proliferation over several decades.”³⁰ Turning to Appalachia, this study shows how the energy of the civil rights movement persisted and shaped new movements for economic equality in Appalachia, as civil rights activists, antipoverty warriors, local women, union organizers, leftist activists, and slew of other outsiders and locals participated in what contemporaries christened the Appalachian

introduction to *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy Hewitt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 1-14. I build on the newest scholarship on the women’s movement that has begun, as historian Anne Valk writes, to examine “how feminism evolved at the local level and within the context of concurrent grassroots initiatives for social, political, and economic change.” See Valk, 2; Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Stephanie Gilmore, ed., *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United State* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); and Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell: Grassroots Feminist Activism in Postwar America* (New York: Routledge, 2013). I borrow “grassroots feminism” from Barbara Greene, a community organizer in Tennessee and Kentucky who began organizing in the anti-strip mining movement in the Cumberland Mountains in the 1970s and 1980s. Grassroots feminism is a helpful phrase because it is not based on reactions to ideological feminisms; rather, Greene and others expressed it as “all-encompassing.” It takes into account the various forms of discrimination that women, especially poor and working-class women outside urban centers, faced daily. See Interview with Barbara Greene by Jessie Wilkerson, May 8, 2011, U-0537, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. See also “Long Women’s Movement in the American South,” oral history interview collection, Southern Oral History Program, UNC-Chapel Hill.

²⁹ Jacquelyn Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1254.

³⁰ Van Gosse, “A Movement of Movements: The Definitions of the New Left,” in *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, ed. Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 279.

Movement. Adopting this wider lens, I explore how women were key to fostering the meeting of movements in Appalachia, where, out of that confluence, a distinct regional movement emerged.

In the story I tell, women were galvanized by the War on Poverty; they built strong alliances across communities; their hard-nosed activism forced many changes in the Mountain South; and that activism led many of them to a gender consciousness that influenced a wave of organizing in the South. They drew on and were key to progressive movements of the 1960s that lasted well into the 1970s. They were part of what one activist called “the social movement stream.”³¹

I rely on both archival research and oral history fieldwork. In his analysis of how oral history has shaped the scholarship on the civil rights movement, Bret Eynon argues that oral testimony is crucial for uncovering the dynamism and vitality of social movements. It provides “invaluable clues to the changing ways that activists and others understood the world and their place in it.” Moreover, he argues, “Linking the personal and the political, oral memoirs reveal the relationship between the stated positions of movement organizations and activists’ individual beliefs, experiences, and actions.” Recent scholars of the War on Poverty and the women’s movement have begun to collect oral history interviews, revealing new contours of the movements.³² I have used oral history interviews to illuminate processes of political

³¹ Thomas Rhodenbaugh, interviewed by Thomas Kiffmeyer and Harry Rice, Interview 939-013 and 939-014, Southern Appalachian Archives, Berea College.

³² See especially Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace*, and Enke, *Finding the Movement*. See also the oral history collection “The Long Women’s Movement in the American South.” John M. Glen cited a flourishing of oral history interviews on the Appalachian War on Poverty and called for Appalachian Studies scholars to analyze the interviews and construct new, more diverse narratives of Appalachia during the transformational period of the War on Poverty. See John M. Glen “The War on Poverty in Appalachia: Oral History from the ‘Top Down’ and the ‘Bottom Up’,” *Oral History Review* 22, no. 1 (Summer, 1995).

consciousness, the roots of movements in local traditions, and the overlap between movements. Moreover, the perspectives of working-class and poor women rarely appear with any consistency in institutional records. To uncover their histories, oral history is the most promising method and interviews are valuable sources. Along with conducting over thirty oral history interviews with activists, I used oral history interviews conducted by others, including those completed for the University of Kentucky's War on Poverty oral history collection and those conducted by former antipoverty warriors, who have begun to document their own histories and memories of the 1960s.

Oral history interviews helped to illuminate archival records in ways that I would not have imagined. Drawing upon clues in oral history interviews, I returned to manuscript collections and searched for specific records that otherwise would have gone unnoticed. When I came across single broadsides or memos about women's activism with little context and no corresponding documents, I often was able to use oral history interviews to understand or amplify their meaning. I explored the records in Special Collections at Berea College, including those of the Council of the Southern Mountains, the umbrella organization for antipoverty reformers and activists in the mountains, and the Appalachian Volunteers, with an eye toward women and gender. At local archives, I have been fortunate to find scrapbooks and memorabilia from women's campaigns. Archival film footage is also key to my research. The award-winning documentary film *Harlan County, USA* captured events in 1970s Kentucky as they occurred. Community-access cable television journalists in Kentucky produced numerous documentary pieces in the 1970s, often focusing on women's activism. Their footage provides a unique opportunity to hear and see how people connected with social movements at the time and how they framed goals for their communities. Finally, I rely heavily on the alternative newspapers

and organizational newsletters that reported the on-the-ground battles in places like the Mountain South. They offer rich insight into daily occurrences as well as activists' strategies and goals.

Many of the activists in this study were based in eastern Kentucky, where they were concentrated in three counties: Pike, Floyd, and Harlan. These counties witnessed a large influx of activists and resources in the 1960s and 1970s, so the sources there are particularly strong. Rather than providing case studies of the movements in these three counties, however, I use the developments and events in them to illuminate broader themes across the region and to show how activists in these areas were also part of regional and national organizations. Thus, the study as a whole offers an analysis of the social movements that sprouted across the Appalachian South, as activists formed networks across the region, from eastern Kentucky to eastern Tennessee, southwestern Virginia, and West Virginia.

Chapter One views the history of the eastern Kentucky coal fields through women's eyes by chronicling Eula Hall's and Edith Easterling's paths to the antipoverty movement of the 1960s. Their life histories provide a sense of place, offer a glimpse into the patterns of working-class women's lives in Appalachia, and illuminate the paths that women took to progressive social movements, where they drew upon their own pasts as they cultivated discussions about democracy. Their stories push us to consider the historical and social contexts in which the federal antipoverty initiatives of the 1960s took place. I argue that a collective memory of labor struggles and a community ethic of care provided the foundation for women's involvement in the federal War on Poverty.

Chapter Two traces the War on Poverty at the local level during the years 1965-1968, emphasizing how local people, especially women, found their ways to and participated in

antipoverty programs. The chapter begins by exploring Easterling's and Hall's introduction to the War on Poverty in eastern Kentucky, and it traces the organizations that they encountered and the alliances that buttressed the most successful grassroots organizing. Women found opportunities for employment in antipoverty programs, and the chance to address what they perceived to be the most pressing problems in their communities. The alliances between young, progressive activists and middle-aged community members proved crucial in communities where local governments were unlikely to cede control of organizations or to route public funding to poor people. The volunteer organizations, with their outside grants and federal funding, provided spaces where locals and outsiders gathered, debated, and conceived campaigns. By the end of the 1960s, this coalition drew ire from state and local politicians who saw the growing movement as a threat to their political power and sought to diminish grassroots War on Poverty organizations. Despite the political attacks, the work of local and outsider activists gave a pulse to an Appalachian Movement that would develop by the end of the decade and continue in the 1970s.

Chapter Three shows how new movements for poor people and welfare recipients used regional and national platforms to challenge definitions of poverty that blamed poor people for their plight and to assert their own understandings of welfare. This chapter traces Appalachians' involvement in the Poor People's Campaign, in the anti-poverty organization the Council of the Southern Mountains, and in a regionally distinct welfare rights movement. It ends with an examination of the Appalachian People's March for Survival, held in Washington, D.C. in 1971.

Chapter Four focuses on the community health movement in Floyd County, Kentucky to show how women's political protests expanded between 1970 and 1975, as they took up issues of health care, strip-mining and black lung compensation for disabled miners. Women were crucial in mobilizing communities, through the stories they told and the leadership they offered.

This chapter examines the local political work of the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization, including a campaign for free school lunches and the emergence of a community health movement and the founding of the Mud Creek Clinic. I show how government-funded anti-poverty programs depended on the consistent activism of local people to implement programs and assure that they were serving the people who needed them most.

Chapter Five explores women's involvement in the Brookside Mine strike of 1974, which captivated national audiences and provided women with an unprecedented public platform. During the strike, women in Harlan County started a club to support striking miners and their families and to organize picket lines. They were joined by women activists from across the region and country, many of whom had been active in antipoverty organizations and who subsequently joined independent organizations as part of the regional Appalachian Movement. As in the War on Poverty, women used the platform of the strike to speak about their experiences as working-class and poor women in Appalachia. After the strike, women continued to rely on the networks that they had formed to address racial oppression, economic injustice, and gender inequality in their communities.

Chapter Six explores the regional women's movement that emerged in the Appalachian South in the 1970s. The Appalachian Women's Rights Organization was founded, regional magazines published special issues on women's issues, the Commission on Women in Kentucky held hearings in Appalachia, and women held celebrations during the International Day of Women's Rights. Through all of these episodes, women in Appalachia redefined for themselves the meaning of feminism and women's rights in their lives. There was a class-infused gender-consciousness defined through actions. I argue that these events were the result of many years of activism and that feminism in Appalachia built on the ideas developed over the course of the

1960s. The women's movement did not simply spread to the Appalachian South. Instead, it emerged from an organic response to the particular issues facing women in rural, working-class communities.

CHAPTER ONE

Paths to the Movement: Women's Memories of Life in Appalachian Kentucky

"...where you're from is not who you are, but it's an important ingredient...you must trust your first voice—the one tuned by the people and place that made you—before you can speak your deepest truths."

George Ella Lyon¹

"History, I argued, was to do with time.... Things are put in order, and it is the order that they are put in that gives them historical meaning. They are held together in a particular configuration that explains them: a causal configuration."

Carolyn Steedman²

"The wellsprings for change lie in people's tasks and interactions...."

Karen Brodtkin³

In the summer of 1965, Eula Hall and Edith Easterling lived in neighboring counties in the coal fields of eastern Kentucky. Both grew up in rural white communities in the 1930s. Each quit school after the eighth grade and left home briefly during World War II, following the trail of many migrants from Appalachia who sought work in war industries. Each returned to eastern Kentucky, married, started having children, and strove to keep their children clothed, fed, and in school. Both worked odd jobs to support their families and supplement their husbands' earnings

¹ Quoted in *Listen Here: Women Writing in Appalachia*, ed. Sandra L. Ballard and Patricia L. Hudson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 3.

² Carolyn Steedman, "History and Autobiography: Different Pasts," in *Past Tense: Essays on Writing, Autobiography and History* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1992), 49. See also Joan Wallach Scott, "Storytelling," *History and Theory* (Spring 2011). Scott writes, "For the historian to ignore the stories themselves—their form and content—is to deny agency to historical subjects, to overlook the choices they made and the ways they found to explain their actions to themselves and others. It is to refuse to engage with the novelty of the old, the strangeness of the new, or the irreducible difference of the other—to insist instead on sameness, on the comfortable familiarity of the already known," 304-305.

³ Karen Brodtkin, *Caring by the Hour: Women, Work, and Organizing at Duke Medical Center* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 4.

but also struggled to find work that was fulfilling and provided stable income. Above all, Hall and Easterling shared the ability to recognize an opportunity when it landed on the doorstep. And when President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty programs arrived in their communities in 1965, Hall and Easterling saw the chance to change their own lives and to fundamentally alter their communities.

Eula Hall and Edith Easterling represent a group of women in the Appalachian South who used the momentum of the War on Poverty to bring about dramatic change in poor communities. With the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act in August 1964 and the establishment of local War on Poverty programs by 1965, they gained a stage on which they could voice their opinions about the best ways to work for social change and to improve their communities. Sometimes they were key players and other times they were crucial members of the crowd in remarkable movements to redress the severe inequality that had historically plagued poor and working-class Appalachian communities. To more fully grasp the rich history of these women's efforts to organize the Mountain South in the 1960s and 1970s, it is important to look further back, before the federal antipoverty initiatives, the national media attention, and the arrival of activist migrants and young people who lent their energy to the movement.

This chapter chronicles Eula Hall's and Edith Easterling's paths to the antipoverty movement of the 1960s. Their life histories provide a sense of place, offer a glimpse into the patterns of working-class women's lives in Appalachia, and illuminate the paths that women took to progressive social movements, where they drew upon their own pasts as they cultivated discussions about democracy. They also force us to take a step back and consider the historical and social contexts in which the federal antipoverty initiatives of the 1960s took place. The War

on Poverty did not occur in a vacuum, but responded to and was shaped by people and their history.

What Women's Life Histories Tell Us

As Carolyn Steedman notes about historical narratives: "Things are put in order, and it is the order that they are put in that gives them historical meaning."⁴ Her statement speaks as much to the historian's narrative as to the oral autobiography. By embedding antipoverty programs and activism in women's life histories, we are able to see the antipoverty programs in Appalachia from a fresh historical perspective. Women drew upon their own experiences and knowledge to shape local programs and federal policies, a story that is missed when historians focus solely on government officials and middle-class activists, mostly white and male, who were the formal directors of poverty programs. When scholars have written about women in antipoverty efforts in Appalachia, they have done so only briefly and without situating them in historical context. These women enter scenes already under way, and they rarely have much say or influence over the situation.⁵ When we attend to women's full lives and consider what led up to their activism, we begin to understand the order of things differently, and, by extension, we ask novel questions. By grounding women's activism in spoken life histories, this chapter explores the connections between individual life experience and the movement that sought to ameliorate the effects of poverty in the United States. It refocuses the history of the War on Poverty in Appalachia, giving credence to local participants' perceptions of community and poverty and drawing us closer to

⁴ Steedman, "History and Autobiography: Different Pasts," 49.

⁵ In the most comprehensive history of the War on Poverty in Appalachia, only a handful of pages mention individual women or women as a group. See Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*. Yet, oral history projects documenting the War on Poverty have captured the stories and experiences of many women who participated in antipoverty programs. See "War on Poverty Oral History Project," Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky, and "Appalachian Volunteers Oral History Collection," Southern Appalachian Archives, Berea College.

the local knowledge, experience, and history that shaped the federal programs at the grassroots level.⁶

The ordering of events is not only the burden the historian, but also the art of the storyteller. As the feminist theorist Margaret Urban Walker asserts, “Many situations cannot be reckoned with responsibly without seeing how people, relations, and even the values and obligations they recognize have gotten there.”⁷ Women’s stories bind together otherwise episodic moments and events. Through oral autobiography, women contemplate their own pasts to explain how they developed compassion; how they came to care about politics and democratic participation; and how they sought to make the rhetoric of justice a reality in their communities.

Of special importance for the history recounted here, Hall’s and Easterling’s narratives reveal the importance of a community ethic of care in which women were the cornerstones. Because women were most often the caregivers in the community—getting children to school, feeding families, and caring for the young, elderly and disabled providing—they were especially well-positioned to take advantage of War on Poverty resources and to speak to the needs of poor and struggling people in Appalachia. Local women became volunteers and community organizers. They also served as networkers who spread knowledge about antipoverty programs.

⁶ The major studies of the war on poverty in Appalachia chronicle government programs and the regional institutions that were at the forefront of the war on poverty initiatives. They tell us less about the specifics of grassroots involvement and offer very little insight about gender in the programs. See Thomas Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals* and “Looking Back to the City in the Hills: The Council of the Southern Mountains and a Longer View of the War on Poverty in the Appalachian South,” in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History*; Ronald D. Eller, *Uneven Development: Appalachia Since 1945*; Robert Weise, “A New Deal in the Coal War: Carl D. Perkins, Coal, and the Political Economy of Poverty in Appalachia,” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*; Weise, “Isolation and the War on Poverty in a Rural Appalachian Locality,” in *The Countryside in the Age of the Modern State: Political Histories of Rural America*, ed. Catherine McNicol Stock and Robert D. Johnston (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); and one of the earliest scholarly analyses, David E. Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer*. Ronald D. Eller provides a synthesis of grassroots movements in *Uneven Ground*, but the major focus of the study is on “the politics of development in Appalachia.” My study shifts the focus to the women at the local level to open up new perspectives and new questions about how federal policies played out in Appalachia. Scholars of the war on poverty outside of Appalachia have done a better job of explaining women’s involvement, as well as racial and gender politics in the antipoverty programs.

⁷ See Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understanding: A Feminist Study in Ethics* (Routledge, New York, 1998), 110.

In the process they framed debates about the meaning of democracy for poor women and mothers, not only as antipoverty workers, but as people with meaningful pasts who were part of caring communities.

Themes of identity and difference also rise to the surface of oral autobiographies. Attention to the fine-grained details of poverty and the rhythms of women's everyday lives expose the importance of gender, racial, and class difference in the history of women's activism in Appalachia, and they give us a prism through which to consider the history of poverty. In the political parlance of the 1960s, when poverty was "rediscovered" by middle-class America, poor, white Appalachian women were rendered invisible. Two stereotypes pervaded poverty theories of the 1960s: the generic mountaineer (white, male, and rural) and the welfare mother (black, female, and urban). Stubborn, stuck in old ways, and independent to a fault, the mountaineer lived outside of modern life and consequently struggled to keep up in the modern economy and fell into a listless poverty.⁸ The welfare mother was also too independent, but in a less virtuous way as she rejected normative family roles and instead relied on the state, appearing always as a "chiseler," manipulating the system.⁹ Two sides of the same coin, these stereotypes obscured the intertwining of race, class, and gender in the trenches of everyday life. Moreover, they made poverty appear inherent and individual rather than structural. Turning to the life histories of poor white women in Appalachia is but one way of opening up the narrative, countering the

⁸ See Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia On Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920*; Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman and Katherine Leford, eds., *Backtalk From Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

⁹ On the racial mythology of welfare see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*; Gwendolyn Mink, *Welfare's End* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998); Premilla Nadesen, *Rethinking the Welfare Rights Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

stereotypes, and understanding the many social forces that contributed to poverty or shielded one from the worst of it.

The life histories of Hall and Easterling also turn upside down the moral/psychological failings often attributed to poor people. In stories about their own lives, their families, and their communities, they offer a moral vision of a caring and an interdependent society, one in which poverty is due in part to the limitations of the community, not solely the moral failings of an individual. Through the stories they tell, they suggest their future political activism was influenced largely by the caring communities of their youth, which were defined by women's networks. By the time they were mothers and activists, the socio-political order had changed substantially, but Hall and Easterling mapped an ethic of care onto their antipoverty work in the 1960s.

Growing up in Appalachia

Eula Riley Hall and Edith Coleman Easterling grew up less than twenty miles apart in the hollows of Pike County, Kentucky, the easternmost county in the state. Their childhoods provide a glimpse into how girls and women navigated the economic and social structures of the single-industry, coal field economies of Kentucky's Cumberland Mountains. They were born in the 1920s and raised by parents and grandparents who had witnessed rapid political and social transformations as the coal industry began operations. Growing up they heard stories about an earlier time, before the coal companies put their stamp on the region. Hall and Easterling lived through some of the most eventful years of the twentieth century—the Great Depression, World War II, the War on Poverty, and the rise of a dynamic Appalachian Movement in the late 1960s. As white girls and women from one of the poorest regions in the country, they experienced these

changes in particular ways. Contrary to the oft-stated assumption that “time stood still” in Appalachian communities, Eula Hall and Edith Easterling chased, reveled in, and embraced changing times. The roots of their activism, however, can be traced to their childhoods and young adulthoods in the coal fields.¹⁰

Until 1910 Pike County, like most of eastern Kentucky, was sparsely populated. After the Civil War absentee landholders bought the mineral rights to thousands of acres of land. But the steep and narrow ridges were not easily accessible until the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad laid tracks and began operating a line in 1905.¹¹ As the train roared through the region, it brought with it large-scale coal operations and new people. The population of Pike County more than doubled between 1910 and 1930. When Eula Hall and Edith Easterling were born in the 1920s, Pike County was on its way to becoming home to the largest coal producers in the nation, and coal mining soon became the predominant employer of men in the county.¹²

Yet families rarely lived on the labor of miners alone. Employment in the mines was unsteady, so families often supported themselves with a mix of subsistence farming,

¹⁰ For one of the original sources of Appalachian imagery, see William Goodell Frost, “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains,” *Atlantic Monthly* 83 (March 1899). Frost characterized Appalachians as “mountain whites” caught in a “Rip Van Winkle sleep.” Thus they mimicked the culture and ways of early American settlers, but due to a lack of communication with the outside world, they were “consciously stranded” and were “our contemporary ancestors.” Critiques of and references to Frost’s article abound in Appalachian Studies, yet scholars have had little to say about the gendered aspects of Frost’s article. For instance, Frost praised the “mountain maid” for retaining her spinning and weaving skills. He claimed that spinning “has helped to form the character of our race, and it is pleasant to find that here in Appalachian America it is still contributing to the health and grace and skill of womankind.” He also noted that in the mountain woman’s sense of propriety and her loyalty to family and home, she proved “her descent from Eve.” The flip-side to her loyalty, however, was the blood feud, enacted by the male members of the family. In Frost’s description of the Mountain South, he attends as much to a description of the gender roles and gender balance that he perceives in mountain families as he does to the “contemporary ancestors,” and their relationship to Anglo-Saxon heritage. Indeed, his conceptions of the appropriate roles for mountain women and men buttress his larger argument about the preservation of a distant past in the lives and cultures of mountain people. See also Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind*; Billings, et al., *Back Talk From Appalachia*.

¹¹ Lon Rogers, “Fon Rogers: A Pioneer Coal Operator in Pike County, 1906-1916,” in *Pike County 1822-1976, Historical Papers Number Two* (Pikeville: Pikeville Historical Society, 1976), 85.

¹² Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 135-136, 155.

sharecropping, and domestic work. Though Pike County is a mountainous terrain, the creek beds, small valleys, and hillsides offered sweet solace to mountain families who depended on the land for food. Stories about milking cows, slaughtering pigs, plucking chickens, digging potatoes, hunting herbs, and gathering corn abound. And the people performing this farm labor were often mothers, grandmothers, and children. Semi-subsistence farming is a family affair. Men worked on the farms until wage work in the mines or the timber industry beckoned, so women and children were often the backbones of the farm. Women also provided necessary care work in the community. Stories of feeding families, caring for sick children, and running farms are the threads that hold women's life narratives in one piece. Women worked to ease the effects of poverty. But survival was a constant battle. Poor health, domestic violence, too few jobs, and simple bad luck defined women's lives as much as their grit. In telling the stories of their lives, Hall and Easterling express their moral visions and their hopes for their own lives and communities.

"I grew up poor as anybody could be," Eula Hall declares of her childhood. Eula was born in 1927 to Lee D. and Elizabeth "Nannie" Riley in the community of Greasy Creek in Pike County, Kentucky. Elizabeth Riley had been a teacher in West Virginia before she was forced to return to Pike County, single and pregnant, so that family could help support her. She soon married Lee D., an older man and widower who had two children from a previous marriage. Lee D. and Elizabeth had seven more children together. Lee D. occasionally worked in the mines setting timbers, but when the mine he worked for shut down during the Depression, the family became sharecroppers. They grew corn and potatoes, a portion of which Lee D. gave to the

landowners for rent. Together the family tended gardens and kept cows for milk and hogs for meat.¹³

Eula describes her family as “one of those poor mountain famil[ies] that raised what you eat and eat it.” The children often stayed home from school to work in the cornfields or potato patch. They also gathered ginseng and sassafras bark, which they sold at the herb market in town. Lee D. and Elizabeth used the profits from selling herbs to buy the children shoes and clothes. Even then, Eula says, the children never had more than one or two outfits at a time, and their shoes were often cheaply made and wore out quickly. “We never knew what it was to have good warm clothes or shoes,” she muses.¹⁴

Access to a complete primary education was rarely a guarantee for children growing up on farms in the hollows of rural Kentucky in the 1930s and 1940s. Families dwelled in small valleys and along creek beds, and many lived several miles from primary schools. Parents often found it too difficult to send children to school. Rural school systems could not afford fleets of buses, and even if they had, the gravel roads could not have sustained them. Yet Eula’s family, especially her mother, who had worked as a school teacher, realized the value in education. When Eula was nine, her family moved closer to the school house so that the oldest three

¹³ Eula Hall, interview by Neil Boothby and Robert R. Korstad, September 5, 1992, Southern Rural Poverty Collection, DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy, Duke University, <http://dewitt.sanford.duke.edu/rutherford-living-history/southern-rural-poverty-collection/#hall>. The 1930 census has Lee Riley listed as a general farmer. The census lists Eula, her older brother Estil, and her younger sister Lacy as the grandchildren of Lee Riley. Lee D.’s son Fred (31) and Fred’s wife Juda (25) also lived in the home, perhaps creating confusion for the census worker who might have thought that the children belonged to the younger couple instead of to Lee D. (68) and Nannie (25). See 1930 U.S. Federal Population Census, *15th Census of the United States*.

¹⁴ Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad; Hall, interview with the author, March 10, 2011.

children, including Eula, could attend school. Eula and her twelve year old brother and seven year old sister set out for their first day of school together.¹⁵

“To tell you we was unhappy, I’d be lying. We were happy. We lived a good life and we didn’t know any different,” Eula says. But like many young people, she absorbed the meaning of class difference when she began attending school. School was not only a place where one learned to read and write; it was a place where children acted out and absorbed social status. Eula remembers, “When we got to school we knew that other people had more than we had and that they had better clothes and that the teachers preferred the children that had the most.” Eula’s father rented land from men who lived nearby and who also had children in school. Schoolchildren knew who came from landowners and who came from renters, and they often self-segregated based on class assumptions. Eula asserts that the teachers treated poor children differently, as though they were “ignorant or low class.”¹⁶ She remembers that “you could tell the difference. You could feel it, and you could tell it.”¹⁷

Eula’s feelings of exclusion were not peculiar to her but reflected widely-held perceptions of poor white people. Scientific explanations for poverty had gained nationwide prevalence in the early twentieth century, and eugenic ideology in particular held broad appeal to many educators in the Kentucky mountains. Those who subscribed to eugenic beliefs considered poor whites to have bad genes and defective traits, and they linked these traits to the immoral behavior of poor whites, especially to what they perceived to be inbreeding in isolated Appalachian communities. Alice Spencer Geddes Lloyd, a Progressive Era reformer from New

¹⁵ Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Hall, interview with author, March 2011.

England who established 100 elementary schools in the Kentucky mountains and founded a settlement school in Knott County, Kentucky, conducted a “eugenic survey” of eastern Kentucky families in 1918. She wrote, “Intermarriage—oh, terrible intermarriage—has resulted in the development of racial weaknesses—low intelligence, bad eyes, epilepsy, and so on.”¹⁸ According to one scholar, Lloyd selected students for schooling based on their family’s “good breeding” and avoided those whose families appeared “deteriorated.”¹⁹ Lloyd and her contemporaries promoted the idea that the mountaineer came from a superior Anglo-Saxon stock, but his genetic inheritance could not be taken for granted, for immoral behavior could degrade his whiteness. These constructions of whiteness elided class exploitation and inequality and perpetuated the idea that poor people stayed poor because of pathological behavior patterns. Ideas about the gradations of whiteness showed up daily with the segregation of students and mistreatment by teachers.

The racial and class demographics of Pike County at mid-century show how, unlike many parts of the Deep South or in cities across the country, whites made up the majority of poor people. In Pike County, the majority of middle-class and wealthy whites, as well as the majority of African Americans (who mostly lived below the poverty line), clustered in urban centers, the largest of which was the county seat Pikeville. Poor whites were the overwhelming majority of the rural population, and thus rural areas became stigmatized as zones of poverty.²⁰

Numbers tell us the spatial and racial dimensions of poverty in eastern Kentucky. How poor white people interpreted these dimensions of their lives is more complex. Eula’s use of

¹⁸ Quoted in Denise Giardina, “Appalachian Images: A Personal History,” in *Back Talk from Appalachia*, 169.

¹⁹ P. David Searles, *A College for Appalachia: Alice Lloyd on Caney Creek* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 87-88.

²⁰ See Office of Economic Opportunity Information Center, “Community Profile: Pike County, Kentucky” (Washington, DC: Office of Economic Opportunity, 1966).

racial categories in her narrative is instructive. Stories about difference based on class assumptions permeate her narrative, but she also knew that the bigotry she experienced did not compare to African Americans who lived in town. She rarely saw black people—only on occasion when she traveled to Pikeville to sell herbs. Eula remembers, “There was one place down there on the side of the riverbank, and they called it String Town. There was some black people who lived there. Poor blacks always got the worst housing. They had the worst side of town it seemed like.”²¹ String Town was on the outskirts of Pikeville, and residents had to travel the river by boat to get to town. After arsonists burned down the community’s black school, String Town students had to travel ten miles away. Without adequate transportation, going to school became an all-day affair.²² As an elderly woman, Eula reflects that while she had a hard time as a poor white child, she knew that African Americans in Pike County were treated much worse.

The recognition that African Americans in Pike County knew hard times does not, however, diminish the poverty that Eula witnessed and experienced her white community. Even if Eula had wanted to hide her family’s social status, her clothing and her body—marked by the symptoms of poverty—would have betrayed her. She and her siblings wore handmade clothes and sometimes they had to go barefoot. Cold air and water, combined with the harsh lye soaps that were common at the time, dried and cracked their feet and hands. Some mornings Eula had to roll cloth around her hands before she milked the cows so that she wouldn’t get blood in the milk. She points out, however, that her experiences were not unusual and states that her family

²¹ Eula Hall, interview with the author, March 2011.

²² For memories of String Town, see Mary Music, “Years of Service, History Under One Roof,” *Appalachian News-Express*, June 1, 2007.

was “part of a community that lived like that.”²³ She recalls that some children had it even worse than her, especially those who developed sores due to poor nutrition and unsanitary living conditions. With pride Eula says that her mother taught the children “how to be clean,” for she often used Clorox in the bathwater and dishwater to kill germs.²⁴

Despite the many hardships of growing up poor, Eula found delight in life as a young person. Even though she lived in a hollow and did not make it to town often, she loved clothes and longed to recreate the popular fashions of the day. In the context of her narrative, the importance of dressing stylishly points to her desire to counter the idea that her life was all drudgery. At the same time, the right kind of clothes allowed her to express her drive to better her own condition. As the feminist scholar Carolyn Steedman points out, “decent clothing has been a necessity for any woman or girl child who wants to enter the social world; it’s her means of entry, and there are rules that say so.”²⁵ In order to go to school or to join the world of paid labor, Eula needed appropriate clothing. Moreover, through her clothing, she could express her knowledge of fashion and modern goods.²⁶

By the 1920s, rural women began making dresses from the cotton sacks that held staple goods such as flour and chicken feed. When Eula was a girl, the cotton from the sacks was a plain beige or white, and the dresses made from the sacks formed shapeless silhouettes. Feed

²³ Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad.

²⁴ Hall, interview with author, March 2011.

²⁵ Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

²⁶ U.S. women’s historians have written rich accounts of working-class women, fashion, and consumer desire. See especially, Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Meyerowitz, Joanne, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South.” *Journal of American History* 73 (September 1986).

sack clothing had become “an emblem of poverty” even as it was also “a testament to ingenuity.”²⁷ Eula designed her own dress patterns and, despite having to use feed sack on a portion of the dress, saved up enough money for fancier “bought” cloth that she used on the skirt and to trim the sleeves and collar. By mixing feed sack and purchased cloth, Eula demonstrated rural girls’ ability to navigate poverty at the same time that they fantasized about a life with more material goods. By using prettier dyed and printed cloths, Eula took a symbol of poverty and fashioned it into something new and stylish, imagining her way into a better life.

Eula also fretted over her hairstyle, knowing that it took money to purchase a permanent wave, the most popular style of the day. Not only did she lack funds, but her stern and religious father did not think that girls should cut their hair or get perms. But Eula was determined. She and her sister hoed corn for fifty cents a day until they could afford to get their hair styled at the beauty shop in town. Unable to afford both a cut and perm, the Hall sisters took turns clipping each other’s hair into a short bob, the style of the movie stars. Once their permed bobs were complete, the sisters wore caps around the house to hide their hair and avoid upsetting their father. When they went to school, they showed off their hair styles to their classmates. One day the Eula’s father came to school to pick her up unexpectedly, and he saw her modern hairdo. Eula recalls, “He fussed a lot at us, but he didn’t beat up on us or nothing.”²⁸

Eula’s formal education lasted until she was fourteen, when she graduated from eighth grade. “I loved school. I hated the last day of school,” she says wistfully. Eula was a good student who wanted desperately to go to high school. But there were no secondary schools in her community, and her family could not afford to send her to the high school in town. As an old

²⁷ For a history of the feed sack dress, see Lu Ann Jones, *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002). In the 1940s, the makers of cloth sacks caught onto the trend and began making sacks with colorful prints that attracted women consumers, 175.

²⁸ Hall, interview with author, March 2011.

woman, Eula embodies the young girl who had to quit school—and subsequently let go of her childhood— as she states, “You want to be somebody, you want to make something out of yourself, and you ain’t got a chance in the world” when you are poor, a child, and cannot afford to go to school.²⁹

Rural girls in Appalachia learned quickly how to survive in a world in which death, hunger, and violence crept around the edges of their existence. Little was given to them, and they learned to work hard and take care of themselves and others in their community. Edith Coleman (now Easterling) knows as well as anyone the ill effects of poverty on family and community. Her family was not as poor as others in the community where she grew up, but she witnessed the pain and suffering caused by poverty and knew that it was never far away from her own family. She also grappled with what it meant that her family had more food and money than others.

Edith Coleman was born in September 1925, in a hollow called Poor Bottom in the Marrowbone Creek community. When Edith was a baby, her mother Elie died. She was told that a mule had kicked Elie over a bank, leading to her death. Elie left behind five month-old Edith and five other children. The little girl Edith learned early that life struggles pushed some people to callousness while other people developed a core of strength and exemplified decency, dignity, and resilience. For the first four years of her life, until her father Bev married again and had a wife to help care for the children, Edith lived with her paternal grandmother Vina Coleman.³⁰

Vina had married at fourteen and moved from Virginia to eastern Kentucky with her husband Joseph Coleman, a veteran of the Union Army. The Colemans built a two-story home—

²⁹ Hall, interview with author, March 2011.

³⁰ Edith Coleman Easterling’s narrative is drawn from three oral history interviews: Edith Easterling, interview by Carrie Kline, March 12, 2011, Southern Appalachian Archives, Berea College; Edith Easterling, interview by Gibbs Kinderman, October 10, 1989, “War on Poverty Oral History Collection,” Louie B. Nunn Oral History Center, University of Kentucky; Edith Easterling and Jake Easterling, interview by Nyoka Hawkins, August 22, 1987, “Social History and Cultural Change in the Elkhorn Coal Fields Oral History Project,” Louie B. Nunn Oral History Center, University of Kentucky.

considered large at the time—with Joseph’s veteran’s pension. Joseph had been trained as a teacher, and he also doctored people in the community. Edith characterized her grandparents as people with some money and a nice house, “but they shared what they had.” The Colemans began the kind of work that later might be considered antipoverty work. They took in unmarried, pregnant women and men with venereal diseases, or “bad diseases.” The men stayed and worked on the farm until they were cured, and the women cooked and kept house until they bore their children and had someplace safe to go.³¹

As an old woman and widow, Vina continued her caregiving labor, but now for her own grandchildren. Before the death of Edith’s mother, Vina was already raising two of her grandchildren whose father had been killed in the mines. When Elie Coleman died, Vina took in the six children. Among the eight grandchildren, three were still in diapers, yet Vina managed. She was an industrious woman who worked tirelessly. One night when Edith was old enough to help her grandmother with chores, one of the pigs got out, and a car hit and killed it. With Edith’s help, Vina skinned the pig that night and prepared to cure it. Money and food were scarce in the 1930s, and Vina could not let the pig’s meat go to waste. Even in old age, Vina continued to work in her garden and help provide for her large extended family. Edith recalled that her grandmother often used the garden hoe as a walking cane, steadying herself on the way to the garden and, once there, using it to work the soil.³²

In Edith’s stories about her childhood, Vina Coleman is a hardworking, stoic woman who kept the children fed and clothed during hard times. Edith came to identify more with her grandmother, who was a mother to her, than she did her father Bev Coleman, a foreman in the

³¹ Easterling, interview by Kline; Easterling, interview by Kinderman.

³² Easterling, interview by Kline.

coal mines who could be stingy with his money. She sometimes describes him as “mean-hearted” and at other times as “tender hearted.” She remembers that he would sob in church services, but “when he’d get out of there he’d cuss out the blue moon.” He was especially harsh with his children; the line between discipline and violence was thin. He used a leather strap on which he sharpened his razor to whip his children. Edith, who had witnessed her father beating her siblings, learned to stay out of his way.³³

In the small community along Marrowbone Creek—where families lived fairly close, most of the men worked in the mines, and the children attended school together—Edith learned the difference between not having enough money for consumer goods and not having basic life necessities. She remembers that the difference between her house and the poorest people’s homes was that her family’s home was painted, it had weather-boarding, and it was slightly bigger than the coal camp houses. Eventually her father was able to afford a refrigerator and a washing machine, too. But there were also similarities between the families. None of them had running water, and much of the food they ate they produced themselves. Few of the children went to school beyond the eighth grade because their families could not afford to send them. Edith understood that her family had more, but she also knew that her family struggled. She remembers that as a child she thought her family “was poor as church mice,” for they did not own much and lived in a hollow where there was no plumbing or running water. Looking back she observed, “We lived hard; we lived like vagrants, almost.” Yet, to the children who lived in shacks, Edith seemed to be living lavishly. She remembers: “I had this boy to tell me one time he didn’t want me to come into his house. He said, ‘I hated to see you come so bad because you’d

³³ Easterling, interview by Kline.

see what we had to eat.’ And see, I wasn’t thinking what they had to eat. And I ask him, ‘Why?’ And he said, ‘Well, you’ve always had so damn much and we had so little.’”³⁴

Perhaps part of the tension in Edith’s stories is that the poverty she witnessed affected her tremendously and made her feel helpless as a child, but she also felt guilty for having more than others. She remembers a time when she was staying with her grandmother and a neighbor snuck into her kitchen and ate lard out of a bucket because he was so hungry. When her grandmother found him, she fixed him something to eat and sent food with him for his wife and children. “I thought about that so much,” Edith muses. She also thought about how her own father would have reacted if he found someone stealing from his lard bucket: he would have sent him away and told him he better never catch him near his home again.³⁵

Edith knew that there were “people raised with a silver spoon [who] looked down on us.”³⁶ Even if the Colemans had more than others, they were still people from the hollows, and coming from the rural outskirts carried with it a stigma. After becoming a community activist in later years, Edith confronted such divisions between town and country head on. For instance, in a meeting with a school superintendent, Edith argued for a new road so that rural children could ride buses to school. The superintendent fired back that if families chose to live in hollows, then they deserved to walk in the mud.³⁷

As a young person, Easterling also learned about the labor movement. Eastern Kentucky was rife with labor struggles in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Harlan County is most often remembered as the center of labor struggles, but coal miners throughout the region pushed for

³⁴ Easterling, interview by Hawkins.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Easterling, interview by Kinderman.

United Mine Workers of America-organized mines. As in Harlan, pro-union workers in Pike County faced serious consequences, including being blacklisted or being harassed by guards hired by the company to suppress union efforts. In 1933, workers at the Henry Clay Mine in Marrowbone Creek attempted to organize the under the UMWA, and the company promptly began to fire miners. The mine owners soon closed down the mine rather than honor a union contract. But before the shutdown, one miner was shot and killed, another was wounded, and many others arrested during a gun battle between the pro-union workers and company guards.³⁸

Bev Coleman did not support the union. As a mine boss, he profited by working the miners hard (he stayed at the mines 12-15 hours a day himself), and the company rewarded him for his commitment to driving the men under him to produce as much coal as possible. Edith remembers watching him crawl out of the window and sneak to work during strikes. Within her own family there were pro-union miners, and she watched as her family split along labor lines. One of her uncles lost his job and “everything he had” because he supported the UMWA. As an adult Edith was haunted by memories of sitting on the front porch and seeing the big spot lights that the company shone into the woods as they searched for pro-union workers who were hiding out. Edith was the same age as the daughter of the man who had been murdered during the labor conflict, and though she was too young to understand what had happened at the time, she later reflected: “It was a sad time. It was hard on the children. [We] didn’t know what was happening. Times was hard.”³⁹ Such memories made a deep impression on her, and Edith came to believe

³⁸ Easterlings, interview with Hawkins.

³⁹ Edith Easterling, interview by Nyoka Hawkins. For the collective memories of the labor battles of the 1930s in Pike County, see the oral history collection, “Social History and Cultural Change in the Elkhorn Coal Fields.” See especially Edgel Hutchinson, interview by Nyoka Hawkins, August 6, 1987; Easterling, interview by Kline; Edith Easterling, interview by Anne Lewis, Outtakes from “To Save the Land and People,” Appalshop Film Archive, #5237/#5238.

that the mining operators' harassment of union workers was symptomatic of a larger imbalance of power in the coal fields.

Learning to Care

Eula Hall nor Edith Easterling learned important skills from mothers and women in the community, and both identify key moments in which they learned to care for and labor for their families and broader community. These are the foundational stories for their longer activist careers. Such stories do not erase the moments of violence that punctuate the women's narratives, but they do offer counterpoints and provide powerful framing devices for the women as they tell their own histories.

Feminist philosophers define *caring* as an "activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web."⁴⁰ Hall and Easterling draw moral boundaries in their narratives that speak to their sense of human dignity, fairness, and justice. They come from a line of caregiving women. These women demonstrated a belief in human interdependence and accepted the burdens of care for the greater good of their society. Because caring—for children, old people, the destitute and banished—so often fell to women, their stories of caring also spotlight issues of gender and the particular moral visions of women. Stories of women's burdens, responsibilities, and caregiving anchor the narratives of women activists and reveal the ways that grassroots movements are embedded in a long history of struggle, story, and what one theorist

⁴⁰ Berenice Fisher and Joan C. Tronto, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Care" in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, eds. Emily Abel and Margaret Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 40.

has called an “expressive-collaborative view of morality,” buoyed by the accounts of past and present.⁴¹

In Eula Hall’s family of eleven, all the children had to perform chores in the house or on the farm. As historian Rebecca Sharpless has found in her study of women on Texas cotton farms, a process of gender socialization shaped farming families: “Families expected female children to work as hard as their brothers outside the house, and then perform house-related chores as well. While many male children did field work, few engaged in such tasks as washing dishes or minding younger siblings, as female children did.”⁴² Similar patterns can be found in eastern Kentucky. Eula and her siblings helped Lee D. plant, tend, pick, and sell crops. As one of the older female children, Eula performed additional household chores and learned early how to take care of a family. She was the “back-up” to her mother: by the time she was twelve, she could kill, pluck, and dress a chicken; she prepared meals for the family; changed the babies’ diapers and rocked them to sleep; and learned to plant a garden and can the produce. While boys and young men attended school or worked in mines and on farms, mothers taught girls how to run a home and feed a family.⁴³

Women’s labor also extended beyond the home. Eula accompanied her mother to the homes of neighboring women, where Elizabeth Riley helped with the delivery of babies or cared for sick families. From an early age Eula learned an ethic of care from her mother, whom she called “the Good Samaritan.” When women were facing the severe illness of a child, Eula’s mother would “go in and cook, help take care of the other children while the mother took care of

⁴¹ Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 105.

⁴² Rebecca Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 35.

⁴³ Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad; Hall, interview with author.

the sick one.” She also helped deliver babies: she was “good at keeping warm fires in the fireplaces.” Eula remembers, “She’d do anything for anybody just like that.”⁴⁴

Likewise, Vina Coleman served as a role model for Edith Easterling, who remembered especially her grandmother’s stories of rescuing girls who had been thrown out of their homes because they were unmarried and pregnant. Edith recollects, “My grandmother told me that there’d been many a time at 12 and 1 o’clock in the morning she’d be out on these ridges, a’coming on her horse with some girl that’d been run off. Maybe she’d find her under a cliff somewhere; maybe she’d hunted all day for her.” After she picked up the girl, no doubt scared and confused, Coleman housed her and nursed her through her pregnancy. Hall and Easterling later provided similar forms of assistance as they volunteered in the war on poverty; driving women and men to the hospitals and welfare offices and advocating on behalf of poor people. Edith says that because of seeing and hearing about her grandmother’s work, “I was always interested in people and people’s welfare.”⁴⁵

In the stories about women’s work, mothers and grandmothers are not cast as women relegated to the private, domestic sphere, even if their abilities might be considered traditionally female work. Rather, women were the backbones in the community, working as hard as anyone to bring well-being to family and community.⁴⁶ It would be easy to characterize an older generation of women like Elizabeth Riley or Vina Coleman as stereotypical strong mountain

⁴⁴ Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad; Hall, interview with author.

⁴⁵ Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad; Easterling, interview by Hawkins.

⁴⁶ Rebecca Sharpless and Melissa Walker argue that notions of separate spheres rarely applied to rural farm women, for “The physical location of their work could not be easily classified as either ‘public’ or ‘private.’ Women worked, for the most part, in the places where they lived. [...] For farm families, home was not a ‘haven’ from the public world or the world of production; it *was* the location of production,” in “Pretty Near Every Woman Done a Man’s Work: Women and Field Work in the Rural South,” *Work, Family, and Faith: Rural Southern Women in the Twentieth Century* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 43-44.

women, performing chores out of a sense of duty. But their presence in their daughters' and granddaughters' stories is more meaningful and complex. Edith reminisces that her grandmother taught her to "speak what you believe." She also instilled in her a sense of self-worth, telling her never to let a man put her down and teaching her that men's work and women's work were equally valuable. Easterling and Hall express a moral responsibility to people in their communities, and they make sense of that responsibility by embedding it in a moral lineage: the stories of their foremothers.⁴⁷ As they link their own actions and sense of responsibility to an older generation of women, Easterling and Hall also adapt those histories to their own experiences and rework them to explain their involvement in the region-wide antipoverty movement of the 1960s.

Becoming Women: Migration, Work, and Marriage

As historian James Gregory has shown, migration from the Appalachian South, stretching from West Virginia to Alabama, picked up steam in the 1920s as the population outgrew the regional economy. In the early 1940s, the nation saw the greatest spatial reorganization in its history as World War II military production led to expanded labor opportunities in the nation's cities. No study of southern migration has explored the migration of young women, specifically, but as war industries opened the factory gates to them, young women from the South and Appalachia migrated to cities such as Baltimore, Cincinnati, and Detroit to work in factories. In cities they found wider work opportunities and adventures. As historians have documented, white southerners were much more likely than their black counterparts to return to their homes,

⁴⁷ Walker, *Moral Understandings*: "Narrative understanding of the moral construction (and reconstruction) of lives is central to understanding how responsibilities are kept coherent and sustainable over substantial stretches of lives that, in important—but not imperial ways, remain people's own. The idea is that a *story* is the basic form of representation for moral problems," 110.

or to travel back and forth between the city and rural home. Eula Hall and Edith Easterling followed these patterns, finding opportunities outside of the mountains before returning home where they married and had children.⁴⁸

Edith Easterling made the long trip to Ypsilanti, Michigan, to work in the war industries with a girlfriend. The young women soon found jobs as riveters at an airplane factory. Easterling loved the work and the freedom entailed in moving to a city, away from parents and routine. After she was married with children, she told stories about being able to buy lipstick for the first time at a dime store. She also kept relics from that past; a reprint of Da Vinci's "Last Supper" and a flower pot that she had coveted so much that she took it from someone's stoop. (She soon felt horrible about taking the pot but kept it to remind herself that she was never going to steal again.) In later years she told her children that she had feared bringing the Da Vinci reprint home because people might gossip about her owning something that appeared Catholic. But she decided to carry it home with her, and her family has the relic to this day. The opportunity to work and the sense of responsibility that came with working in war industry and experiencing a new place made an impression on Easterling.⁴⁹

Like Easterling, Eula Hall was eager for an adventure. When Hall was fourteen—soon after she finished the eighth grade and learned that she would not be able to attend high school—she left Kentucky for the first time. Recruiters from a New York canning factory signed Hall and

⁴⁸ James Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2005). Gregory groups the Southern Diasporas into two broad zones: an outer South and lower South, "one claiming a mixed economy of general farming and extractive industries, the other devoted to cotton. Not only did their economies move in separate cycles but also their demography was sharply different. The cotton belt, consisting of more than 600 counties stretching from the Carolinas to east Texas, was also the 'black belt,' home to the vast majority of southern African Americans. The outer South, in particular a band of states that curved from West Virginia through Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas, was largely white. The two major Southern Diasporas would separate along these racial/geographic lines. The black migration had its base in the cotton belt; most white migrants left the outer South," 23.

⁴⁹ Sue Ella Kobak, interview with the author, March 6, 2011.

her older brother up for a job. Though Hall was only fourteen, she told the recruiters that she was eighteen so that she could go. The siblings joined a throng of youth, first traveling to West Virginia where they boarded a train for New York. Once they arrived at the factory, the young migrants, who had been told they would make forty cents an hour, realized that the company was withholding their pay to cover expenses for transportation and housing. Some of the young people, including Hall, attempted a walk out to protest their treatment. The company accused them of “inciting a riot,” arrested the boys, and sent the girls home. Her brother was soon drafted from jail into the military. Hall recalls that the factory managers threatened to call her parents, but her parents did not have a phone, so she simply told them she was sent home because she was too young, never mentioning the worker protests.⁵⁰ That early episode of fighting back when she and other young workers were being cheated out of their wages instilled in her a sense of solidarity with working-class and poor people.

What meaning do these journeys to the city and the factory have for women’s lives, especially those who returned to Appalachia? In her brilliant rumination on African American return migration to the South, anthropologist Carol Stack states that people who return “come home with new ideas, new energy, new skills, new perspectives, the proving ground has become the setting for a political test.”⁵¹ Even though they were away for brief periods of time, Easterling and Hall’s journeys were revelatory. Easterling discovered a world of consumer goods that she found appealing; she also liked the work that offered some sense of freedom—if nothing else the freedom to buy lipstick and decorative items, the freedom to enjoy her youth. Hall’s experience away from home was perhaps less cheerful, but no less emboldening. She saw how

⁵⁰ Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad.

⁵¹ Carol Stack, *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), xvii.

young workers could be mistreated, but she also learned that organized workers possessed power.

The women's stories of migration also bring to light the difficulties of going home. In Appalachian Studies, scholars have written volumes on the discrimination, based on cultural differences, which Appalachian migrants confronted when they moved to urban areas.⁵² While Easterling and Hall may have experienced discrimination, their stories point to greater fears about the baggage they brought home. Easterling feared that her painting would stir gossip. Hall felt that she needed to keep her involvement in the worker protests a secret from her parents. These moments of exposure—to cities, to work, to different people and cultures—were formative experiences that readied Hall and Easterling for the new ideas and people they encountered during the dynamic, cross-race, -class, and -generational antipoverty programs of the 1960s and 1970s.

Once she was back in Kentucky, Eula Hall began working as a domestic servant, and the excitement of the worker protest in New York was quelled for a time. Young white domestic servants, who were called “hired girls,” usually worked in boarding houses or for wealthier women who were sick or pregnant. At this point, Hall's experiences diverge from her mother's. Her mother was a caregiver in the community, who aided women and families out of a sense of duty. Hall joined the ranks of low-paid, young, poor, and uneducated women who had few options but to work in the homes of wealthier women. School had primed her on class divisions, but working in the home of a family wealthier than her own, Hall learned more painfully than ever what it meant to be poor. While Appalachia is often characterized as a place where the majority of people lived rural existences until well after World War II, Eula's story sheds light

⁵² Chad Berry, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

on the class dynamics, between those who lived in the mountain hollows and those who lived in town.

Eula's first job was for a family that lived in a "real nice house." Among the family members was a daughter close to Eula's age, who offered a comparison of the different expectations of girls based on class status. The daughter of the house was not expected to perform chores. And even though the family did not have electricity and modern appliances, the daughter displayed other markers of wealth: "She stayed in the house, and she had pretty clothes and her fingernails polished." Meanwhile, Eula's fingers bled from scrubbing the laundry in scalding water. Hired girls performed the intense, physically taxing labor of cleaning and disinfecting houses. The hardest labor was washing the bedding after a woman had given birth or a household member had been ill: first the hired girl stripped the beds, then emptied the feathers from mattresses, boiled the casings, starched the bedding, hung it all to dry, and then refilled the casings with feathers before sewing up the opened end. "It's murder," Eula remembers.⁵³

Hired girls also had to learn to navigate relationships with bosses. Eula believed that the people she worked for saw themselves as "better" than the hired girls, who were assumed to be promiscuous. She worked for at least one man who tried to pressure her into dating him, despite being forty-five years old to her fifteen. She reminisces, "I thought this is something else. [I'm] washing and scrubbing your old clothes for the money but I don't have to go out with you."⁵⁴

Eula believed that if only she could find a suitable man to marry, her life would improve. With an employed husband she could expect greater financial stability and relief from laboring for other people. In 1944 she worked in a boarding house that served gas-line workers. McKinley

⁵³ Hall, interview with author, March 2011.

⁵⁴ Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad.

Hall, the nephew of the woman who ran the boarding house, had just been discharged from the military for medical reasons and often stayed at the house. McKinley was a handsome man, and Eula believed he would make a suitable husband. Eula thought of herself as a promising wife: she had worked hard her whole life and knew how to garden, sew, cook, and keep a home. At seventeen years old, Eula married McKinley, and they moved to neighboring Floyd County. The young woman who had believed that a husband could relieve her troubles learned the hard truth that a husband and marriage could make a poor woman's life much worse; a living hell even. McKinley was an alcoholic with a temper and mental illness, possibly the after effects of serving in the military during World War II. He refused to hold a steady job, and he spent his disability check from the Veteran's Administration on whiskey. The promise of marriage soured quickly.

Eula soon became pregnant, and with a child she felt further "trapped" in the marriage. McKinley threatened her life on many occasions and routinely beat her. Eula could not go to work, so she did what she could to get as much support as possible from McKinley. She forced him out of bed in the morning, cajoled him to go to work, and she was ready to fight again when he got home.⁵⁵ Eula also became expert at navigating social services in her area. She learned that, even when she had him arrested, the police department never kept him more than a night. But she could have McKinley committed to the Veteran's hospital when he was on one of his rampages, and the hospital would keep him for longer periods of time. When she was lucky enough to get the hospital to take him for fifty days or more, she could draw a welfare check from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad.

⁵⁶ Ibid; In the state of Kentucky, a married woman could receive AFDC payments if she could provide evidence to the caseworker that her husband was in jail, serving in the military, in the hospital for fifty days or more, or had left the family. See "What is Welfare?" (Teaberry, KY: Hawkeye Press, Inc., May 1968), Box 63, Folder 9, Appalachian Volunteers Records, Southern Appalachian Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College ((hereafter cited as AV Records).

Years after she had escaped the marriage, Eula shared how she had survived and maintained a sense of self-worth. She explained, “My husband was one of the most violent people that you could ever meet. I don’t know how I survived a few times. But the way I hurt *him* most was making sure he couldn’t be like those other men, his friends and buddies. He couldn’t control me. There was no way he could control me. Most men can control their wives. After so much torture and so much pain, they can control them. Mine, he never could.”⁵⁷

Eula’s story of abuse by a husband was familiar to many women in the region. In fact, violence at the hands of male family members runs throughout women’s stories that make up this study. Earlier in her narrative, Eula referred to her father seeing her bobbed hair, and she remembers that he did not beat her *that time*, suggesting that violence was a possibility. Edith Easterling recounted that her own father nearly killed her sister and often became violent with her other siblings. What are we to make of these unsettling stories, woven into the narrative as though they were just another event in the series that make up a life? What are the historical and political implications of family violence in these settings? By revealing their experiences with family violence, the women remind us that they shared their stories after second-wave feminism and the battered women’s movement provided the language to discuss family violence openly. Their stories recall a time when the legal and judicial systems in the United States accepted or ignored varying acts of violence within the home. As feminist scholars have argued, because the family unit was legally constructed as a private domain that husbands and fathers headed, there were few legal ramifications for male abusers of women and girls until the late 1970s.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Eula Hall, “If There’s One Thing You Can Tell Them, It’s that You’re Free,” in *From Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region*, ed. Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), 197.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth M. Schneider, “The Violence of Privacy,” in *The Public Nature of Private Violence: The Discovery of Domestic Abuse*, ed. Martha Albertson Fineman and Roxanne Mykitiuk (New York: Routledge, 1994). See also

Consequently, Eula Hall had little reason to depend on the state to protect her and her children from McKinley; instead, she navigated the welfare and legal systems and devised her own plans for finding reprieve from McKinley's often severe acts of violence.

Historian Linda Gordon has argued, “[V]iolence among family members arises from family conflicts which are not only historically influenced but political in themselves, in the sense of that word as having to do with power relations.” She continues that family violence “arises out of power struggles in which individuals are contesting real resources and benefits” and also reflect “changing social norms and conditions.”⁵⁹ During the Halls’ marriage in the 1950s, men in eastern Kentucky faced a decline in the coal industry. The bituminous coal and lignite mining industry employed over 60 percent of the civilian labor force in Floyd County in the 1950s and 1960s (and nearly all of those employed in the industry with the exception of secretaries or other office workers were men). Over the course of the 1950s, the Floyd County population decreased by 22 percent, due to the mine closures following the World War II boom in production. The unemployment rate in Floyd County, and throughout eastern Kentucky, skyrocketed to 12.9 percent in 1960, seven points higher compared to 1950. McKinley’s troubles clearly extended beyond the local economy—he had untreated medical problems, and he was an alcoholic—but his problems were no doubt compounded by the fact that he was facing one of the worst economies in the nation. (Floyd County’s unemployment rate was higher than 99 percent of U.S. counties.) At a time when more women than ever were entering into public work to help support families, in eastern Kentucky there were still few options for women’s employment. Thus the weight of breadwinning continued to fall on men. McKinley’s behavior is instructive

Anne Enke, Chapter Five, “Finding the Limits of Women Autonomy,” in *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism*.

⁵⁹ Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 3.

here: he wanted to control Eula's activities, but at the same time he was unable to control his own circumstances, in and out of work, sick, and an alcoholic. All of these factors should be considered as a part of the backdrop of the pervasive family violence in eastern Kentucky.⁶⁰

For women in eastern Kentucky, marriage—despite the possibility of abuse—was a valuable asset, and women made decisions about marriage quickly and without too much thought. Without access to reliable birth control, women had frequent pregnancies. Through marriage they could secure some measure of support for children from an employed or employable man. In an economy that valued the labor of men more than women, marriage could make the difference between shopping in the company store on credit and not having enough to eat.

Like Hall, Edith Easterling also married young and found herself in an untenable relationship. She married a man who had served in the Navy, and who, like McKinley Hall, suffered from mental illness and needed to be hospitalized. But because Edith did not have any children with her first husband, she was eventually able to divorce him. While she was separated she began dating Jake Easterling, a coal miner. Edith became pregnant with her first child, and she and Jake decided to marry as soon as her divorce was final. Edith's second marriage proved a better decision than the first, even if her father early on disapproved of the marriage. Jake Easterling was a pick and shovel coal miner, and his knee had been smashed in the mines when he was nineteen. Edith's father saw Jake's disability as a liability: he was less likely to be able to provide for a young wife and children. But Jake Easterling was a quiet and reliable man who continued to labor in the mines until retiring in middle age after surviving a heart attack.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Office of Economic Opportunity Information Center, "Community Profile: Floyd County, Kentucky (Washington, DC: Office of Economic Opportunity, 1966).

⁶¹ Easterling, interview by Kline; Kobak, interview with author.

Edith and Jake Easterling married in 1945. The day following their courthouse wedding they prepared to move into a coal camp in Lookout, Kentucky. They bought all the used furniture they needed to start a home together: “two iron beds, a cook stove, a table, a kitchen cabinet, and a rug for the kitchen.” Jake’s brother, who was in the army, sent the newlyweds \$150 they used to purchase the household items. The couple moved the goods into a coal camp house; the company withdrew \$10 a month from Jake’s paycheck to cover rent. Much like Eula Hall with her dress patterns, Edith proved inventive when it came to replicating American consumer goods using resources available to her, styling her home to look like the kitchens that appeared in glossy American magazines. She used butcher paper to create window blinds, and she scavenged tin boxes, covered them with feedsack skirts, and used them as kitchen “counters.” She taught herself to crochet, and she made three dresses—pink, white, and purple—for her baby girl Sue Ella.⁶²

Edith could do no more than divine that Jake would be a supportive husband and a good father to their four children. In this regard, Edith Easterling and Eula Hall’s lives diverged dramatically. While Eula ultimately saw the War on Poverty and related programs as a way to escape her violent husband, Edith’s activism was buttressed by Jake’s support. Not only was Jake a gentle and kind husband, he also understood deeply the importance of working-class solidarity. As a person who had suffered the physical tolls of working in the mines, Jake knew as well as anyone the importance of the union for securing safety measures, health benefits, and good wages, and he had been active in the United Mine Workers of America since the 1930s. Perhaps because of his belief in worker organization, Jake supported antipoverty programs and Edith’s involvement in them. His name often appears on the petitions and membership lists of

⁶² Easterling, interview by Kline.

community organizations. The relationship between Jake and Edith also suggests the importance of the union tradition in establishing the antipoverty programs. Union families like the Easterlings welcomed organizers and poverty programs, and the Easterlings were one of many local families who opened their homes to young organizers who eventually migrated to Appalachia to work in poverty programs in the 1960s.⁶³

Heading into the Sixties

When federal resources arrived in eastern Kentucky in the mid-1960s, Edith Easterling and Eula Hall were living fairly typical lives. Edith and Jake had moved out of company housing and built a house on Bev Coleman's farmland in Cow Bell Hollow in the community of Poor Bottom. Edith was hired at the nearby school to work as a cook. Edith and Jake had four children, and by the mid-1960s the oldest, Sue Ella, was just starting college at Morehead State University where she would soon encounter War on Poverty programs and carry the news to her mother.

Eula Hall had five children and was doing her best to endure physical abuse and scrounge enough work to keep her children clothed and fed. The Halls lived in Grethel, Kentucky, a rural community in Floyd County. Floyd County had a slightly more rural population than Pike County in 1966, with 93 percent of the population living outside of the one incorporated city in Floyd (Prestonsburg). McKinley could not hold a steady job, but he was known for his moonshining skills. Eula worked tirelessly to make ends meet: she assisted McKinley in his

⁶³ Kobak, interview with the author; Easterling, interview by Hawkins.

moonshine operation; she raised gardens to feed the family; and one winter she sewed thirty-five quilts that she sold for income.⁶⁴

By the early 1960s, a poor economy discouraged many in eastern Kentucky. The Appalachian coal economy was one of the worst hit during the Depression, pushing many Appalachian miners and millhands back to small farms. But World War II had led to growth in Appalachia and the rest of the nation, as well as a redistribution of population. Young men joined the armed forces, and nearly 19 percent of the population left eastern Kentucky in the early 1940s to work in military industries. At the same time the coal and timber industries expanded exponentially, so those men who stayed had greater opportunity for gainful employment than they had in the previous decade. The irony, however, was that the war also led to technological advancements, which for the mining industry meant mechanization. As the war ended and out-migrants and veterans returned home, they possessed high expectations for better economic futures. But by 1948, the postwar boom had run its course and industry's clamor for coal was beginning to stall at the same time that new coal mining technologies replaced miners.⁶⁵ As the Office of Economic Opportunity reported on the eastern Kentucky economy in the mid-1960s, "Where a particular industry alone accounts for the majority of employment in a community, it is likely that a recession in this industry will create an economic problem that both disadvantages the poor and adds to their ranks."⁶⁶ Young people such as Edith Easterling and Eula Hall who had been born during the Great Depression knew that the mines could be unsteady—their fathers had moved back and forth between farming and mining—but the war had seemingly ushered in a

⁶⁴ Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad.

⁶⁵ Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 15-20; Appalachian Regional Commission, *Appalachian Data Book* (Washington, DC: ARC, 1967); U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Technology, Productivity, and Labor in the Bituminous Coal Industry 1950-79*, Bulletin 2072 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1981).

⁶⁶ Office of Economic Opportunity Information Center, "Community Profile: Floyd County, Kentucky (Washington, DC: Office of Economic Opportunity, 1966).

new era of prosperity. As it turned out, the industrial growth associated with the war was only a blip on the radar in Appalachia. The youth who had responded so enthusiastically to the war effort faced a rough economic road in the 1950s, the same decade that they were starting families and depending on gainful employment.

By the early 1960s, Appalachia had become the main stage for discussions about poverty policies during President John F. Kennedy's first term. Poverty in the region had captured the nation's attention as writers and journalists described shocking levels of need in the region. A series of events in 1963—increased unemployment, severe flooding that displaced twenty-five thousand people, and labor unrest—put further pressure on the Kennedy administration to respond to growing crisis in Appalachia. Kennedy soon met with the Council of Appalachian Governors, and the group formed the President's Appalachian Regional Commission (PARC), a joint federal-state organization that would coordinate efforts to tackle poverty and develop the distressed region's economy. Within a day of Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963, Vice President Lyndon Johnson learned of Kennedy's plans to provide job training, development programs, and other forms of poverty relief to the Appalachian states. Ever the believer in the government's ability to produce positive change, Johnson soon announced publicly that he would continue the antipoverty initiative. During his State of the Union address on January 8, 1964, Johnson announced that his administration would lead an "unconditional war on poverty in America," setting in motion a litany of antipoverty measures that delivered federal resources to poor communities across the country.⁶⁷

When President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a war on poverty in 1964 and promised federal resources to poor people in America's urban neighborhoods and countrysides, he could

⁶⁷ For a close reading of the events surrounding PARC and the lead up to the war on poverty initiatives, see Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 72-87.

not have imagined that white, working-class women in Appalachia were waiting in the wings, ready to announce their vision of how federal programs should be delivered. The experiences of Hall and Easterling had in many ways laid the groundwork for their participation in federal programs. They had both witnessed poverty and endured a lack of educational opportunities. But they had also grown up around caring people, who embodied compassion through their willingness to respond to the needs of others. With their rich pasts, Easterling, Hall, and numerous other local women in Appalachia were poised to take advantage of federal programs that promised to improve the lives of people in Appalachia. Eula Hall articulates the eagerness she felt when federal resources arrived in Kentucky: “When the War on Poverty started I signed up as a worker—anything if there’s federal money, I’m going to get my part of it and I’m going to raise hell.”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad.

CHAPTER TWO

Women, Youth, and Coalition Work

Between 1965 and 1968, Eula Hall, Edith Easterling, and many other women in Appalachia learned about and joined antipoverty programs. Some, like Easterling, became “fieldmen” for the Appalachian Volunteers (AV), an antipoverty organization supported in part by the Office of Economic Opportunity; others, like Hall, were community volunteers before they became paid workers. Local women were never the majority of staff people in local or regional antipoverty organizations. Nonetheless, a handful became organizational leaders and the platform of the War on Poverty empowered them to lead grassroots movements in the 1970s. This chapter examines the early years of the War on Poverty in Appalachia, focusing on how women used the programs and the gender and class dynamics that they encountered.

Women approached antipoverty programs geared for the uplift of men and their dependents and reshaped them to address a broad range of struggles in poor communities. The primary model of the War on Poverty jobs programs—the family-wage model—did little to acknowledge the realities facing many Appalachian women. Those realities included disabled and unemployed husbands, a lack of opportunity for young or single women, environmental problems that made unpaid caregiving duties especially difficult, abusive partners, and a punitive welfare system. Antipoverty initiatives at the local level often excluded or limited the involvement of low-income people in decision-making, and sexism further limited women’s ability to gain a foot-hold in government-based programs. As women joined grassroots antipoverty organizations, they rarely addressed gender issues head on, but they reshaped the

programs by mobilizing their own resources to redress the barriers and prejudices they encountered in their daily lives. One of the first steps in that process was to create community spaces and organizations where a diverse coalition of people—women and men, old and young, local and outsider—could gather and work together to create change.

The success of community mobilization relied in part on cross-class and inter-generational alliances. Some of the strongest supporters and allies of community organizations were the young activists who moved to the mountains in the mid-60s, many of whom joined the OEO-funded Appalachian Volunteers and Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA). The alliances between young antipoverty workers and community members of all ages proved crucial in communities where local governments were resistant to ceding control of organizations or to routing public funds to poor people. The volunteer organizations, with their outside grants and federal funding, provided arenas where debate and creative ideas could flourish. Together the local and outsider activists drew inspiration from one another and brought a range of goals to the War on Poverty. By the end of the 1960s, state and local politicians saw the growing movement as a threat to their political power and sought to defund antipoverty organizations. Despite the political attacks, the work of the coalition invigorated an Appalachian Movement that was developed by the end of the decade and continued into the 1970s.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ The Appalachian Movement refers to the grassroots activism that sprouted up across Appalachia, primarily in Eastern Kentucky, Southwest Virginia, and West Virginia, from 1968 through the mid-1970s. Several articles in the regional magazine, *Mountain Life and Work*, which was also the clearinghouse for many campaigns and organizations, refer to the Appalachian Movement. Some activists in the mountains drew parallels between an Appalachian Movement and civil rights organizing, especially the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. For examples, see Si Kahn, "The Appalachian Movement—CSM, New Directions for the '70s" and Mike Clark, "Education and Exploitation," *Mountain Life and Work*, July-August, 1971. For further analysis of the Appalachian Movement and the development of regional consciousness, see Eller, *Uneven Ground*; Glen, "The War on Poverty in Appalachia: Oral History from the Top down and the Bottom up": 67-93; Kiffmeyer, "Looking Back to the City in the Hills."

Women in the War on Poverty

In the early 1960s a series of news reports and books exposed the entrenched poverty of Appalachia, including Harry Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: Biography of a Depressed Region* (1962) and Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962), which included a section on Appalachian poverty. Both books were widely read and caught the attention of President Kennedy, whose 1960 campaign trip to West Virginia had opened his eyes to poverty in the coal fields. In the fall of 1963, after reading a *New York Times* article that described a crisis of unemployment in the Cumberland Plateau, Kennedy instructed his administration to send emergency funds to the families of unemployed miners and to draft a blueprint for national antipoverty measures. Kennedy also oversaw the formation of the President's Appalachian Regional Commission, a joint federal-state committee appointed to draft economic development plans for the region. After the assassination of Kennedy, the Johnson administration continued the work, with Johnson declaring a "war on poverty" in his State of the Union address in January 1964. Following the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act and the Appalachian Regional Development Act, resources and people soon flooded into the region.⁷⁰

Edith Easterling and Eula Hall took advantage of those resources during the early implementation of the programs. Their experiences point to three overarching motivations that led women to participate: a desire to work for the betterment of the community, a personal longing to speak and act on a public stage, and the chance for meaningful employment. Poor and working-class women in the Appalachian coal fields did not have much freedom to pursue job or educational opportunities; those routes required financial stability, good schools, and a

⁷⁰ Douglass Cater, who was an editor of *The Reporter* before becoming a White House aide in 1964, provided context for the Johnson's declaration of a "war on poverty" in his article "The Politics of Poverty," *The Reporter*, February 13, 1964. See also Eller, *Uneven Ground in Appalachia*, 66-77. In his article, Cater discusses some of the major influences on the War on Poverty, including Kennedy's interest in the arguments made by Harry Caudill and Michael Harrington.

willingness to leave families and homes behind. Moreover, the best paying job for working-class people in the mountains, coal mining, was reserved for men. For Hall, Easterling, and countless other women, the antipoverty programs offered paid work and a platform for engaging in community, regional, and even national politics.

Edith Easterling had an abiding interest in local politics and had long found ways to support her neighbors and improve her community. After living in a coal camp for about four years, Edith and her husband Jake moved to “the backside of town,” the community called Poor Bottom, and built a house on her father’s farm. Though Edith and her husband Jake constantly struggled to bring in an adequate income, they had more stability than many others in eastern Kentucky: they had each other, and they had a family member with land. These slight advantages do not fully explain Edith’s early forms of community organizing, especially in a sex-segregated community where women lacked access to the majority of wage work and political positions. Still, she found ways to be involved. She was the chairman of the Republican Party in her district in the early 1960s, following in her father’s and grandfather’s political tradition of Lincoln Republicanism. (She maintained her affiliation with the Republican Party even as she increasingly supported Democratic candidates in the 1960s and 1970s.) Easterling was also an active member of the Parent and Teacher’s Association and served a term as its president. Sue Ella Kobak, Edith’s daughter, recalls that Edith “knew everybody’s business” and “knew every property line in our part of the county.” Sue Ella also recognized that her mother was different from other women, but that she managed to find ways to adjust so that she did not appear *too* different.⁷¹

Thinking back on her mother’s work in the community, Sue Ella called her mother “the unofficial social worker.” Edith often read letters to illiterate neighbors, and when neighbors and

⁷¹ Sue Ella Kobak, interview with the author, March 6, 2011; Easterling, interview by Kinderman.

kin were eligible for Social Security benefits, she helped them fill out the paperwork. Even when family members moved on to northern industrial towns to find work, she kept in touch and notified them when they were eligible for veteran's benefits from the state of Kentucky. Easterling drove people to polling places during elections and provided them sample ballots. When the polio vaccine became available, the health department called on her to visit families, to assure them that the vaccine was safe, and to convince them that they should have their children vaccinated. Edith and Sue Ella were the first in their community to receive the vaccine.⁷²

For Edith Easterling, the antipoverty programs were an extension of her volunteer work. As she saw it, "it was normal" to be involved. She asserted, "I was pretty active in the community. I wasn't doing anything that I shouldn't have done."⁷³

Easterling learned about the antipoverty programs sometime in 1964 when she was working as a cook at a school cafeteria. A man from the University of Kentucky was conducting a survey in the county to see what people wanted and needed from federal programs, and one day he stopped by the school; after talking to Edith he asked if he could come to her home and discuss the antipoverty programs in more depth. The man eventually became a part of a team that worked on bringing a water system to rural Pike County, where families relied on unsafe wells. After Edith's encounter with the surveyor, Sue Ella, who had learned about the War on Poverty as a freshman at Morehead State University, introduced her mother to the Appalachian Volunteers program. Edith eventually became a paid worker in the program. As an important local activist, she was a gatekeeper, hosting antipoverty workers from around the country and introducing them to the community. She helped to found and direct the Marrowbone Folk

⁷² Kobak, interview with author, May 20, 2011.

⁷³ Easterling, interview by Kinderman.

School, which housed a sewing co-op for women and served as a meeting space and training ground for activists and community people. Edith was a key figure in the Appalachian Volunteers and one of the few female “fieldmen,” or staff, that the organization hired.⁷⁴

In 1965, Eula Hall and her five children were living in Floyd County, Kentucky, where over a third of families had incomes below the poverty level and over half of the housing had been deemed substandard.⁷⁵ Eula did not have a formal job, but along with caring for the children, gardening and canning food, she helped her husband McKinley produce moonshine for sale, which was, sometimes their only source of cash income.⁷⁶

Unlike Edith Easterling, Hall had not been involved in community organizing or local politics before the War on Poverty, at least not in any formal way, but her story suggests a fluid definition of community organizing. Without formal organizations, women helped one another and “organized” around pressing needs. Hall helped women she knew learn how to drive. This may seem like a politically neutral act, yet, as Hall explained, if a woman could drive, she gained a degree of independence. She stated that before the War on Poverty, “The most I’d been involved—I tried to teach other women how to drive. Our husbands didn’t want us to drive. They can’t control you if you can drive and get out and get on a little. You’re not going to be home 24 hours a day.” If a woman could drive, she could “go to the store, pick out what your kids needed to wear to school, you could go ride to the company store and get groceries....It was just a big benefit to be able to drive a vehicle, especially when there [was] no public transportation, no way

⁷⁴ Easterling, interview by Kinderman; Easterling, interview by Kline.

⁷⁵ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *1970 Census of the Population: General Social and Economic Characteristics*, Kentucky, vol. 1, pt. 19; Richard A. Couto, *Poverty, Politics, and Health Care: An Appalachian Experience* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), 63.

⁷⁶ Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad.

of getting anywhere. It was a big benefit to be able to drive.”⁷⁷ The War on Poverty expanded on and gave new meaning to such informal networks, as women drew upon them to inform one another of federal resources and to build support for antipoverty campaigns.

Hall’s first encounter with the War on Poverty came through the Highway 979 Community Action Council and the VISTA workers who were assigned to the group. In 1965 Hall hosted a VISTA from the national pool, Colleen LeBlanc of Minnesota and received a cash payment of \$12.50 per week for room and board. By concretely supporting the program Hall also helped assure that federal funds were more likely to reach communities in Floyd County. As one local minister reported, along with providing human services, VISTA injected the local economy with much needed funds and made it more likely that community groups in that county would receive federal grants.⁷⁸ The volunteers helped to create opportunities for women who needed income and were eager to change their lives and communities. The anti-poverty volunteers, whom Hall called “good resource people,” gave her a direct line into community organizations that could provide alternatives to her hard-scrabble life. LeBlanc, who had a car, traveled the county and drove women to community meetings where they discussed the antipoverty programs and the needs in their communities.

Hall soon became a member of the VISTA-staffed 979 Community Action Council, which between 1965 and 1969 secured emergency wells and a water system for Floyd County, informed people about welfare rights, helped them apply for food stamps, pressured Kentucky politicians to provide better benefits to poor families, and established a community newspaper that kept local people up-to-date about the anti-poverty programs in the region. Hall did not take

⁷⁷ Eula Hall, interview with the author, September 15, 2012.

⁷⁸ William G. Poole, “A Citizen’s Report on Volunteers in Service to America and Appalachian Volunteers in Floyd County, Kentucky, Nov. 11, 1966,” Box 8, Folder 3, AV Records.

on a more official role until 1969 when she became a spokesperson for the community health movement in Floyd County. Nonetheless, her consistent involvement in the antipoverty programs gave her access to skills and people that would help her in the future.⁷⁹

The stories of Hall and Easterling—along with the major groups and people with whom they intersected—offer a fresh perspective of the War on Poverty in Appalachia, in which local people and outsiders built alliances and worked together to tackle short- and long-term problems. They adapted on-the-ground antipoverty programs whose original goals focused on job training and relief for male breadwinners, often with a top-down approach, and implemented projects addressing the issues that they thought most crucial for changing patterns of poverty in their communities.⁸⁰

Gender, Social Status, and the War on Poverty in Appalachia

Women in Appalachia encountered programs through the War on Poverty that in many ways did not target or even address the problems that, as caregivers for the elderly, disabled, and children, they faced in a crumbling economy. Nonetheless, key pieces of antipoverty legislation employed a “language of opportunity,” opening the way for poor people, and especially women, to take on roles in community organizations and direct resources in ways that they saw fit.⁸¹ In particular, the Economic Opportunity Act (1964) outlined that community action agencies should be “developed, conducted, and administered with the maximum feasible participation of

⁷⁹ Hall, interviews with author, March 2011 and September 2012.

⁸⁰ On how women utilized the antipoverty resources in urban areas, see Naples, *Grassroots Warriors*, and Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace*. Orleck describes women's involvement in antipoverty efforts as *motherist politics*, since women were often driven to join community organizations that would benefit their children and themselves as mothers. The women in this study sometimes express motherist politics, but their politics are much broader as well. See Orleck, “Introduction: The War on Poverty from the Grass Roots Up,” 19.

⁸¹ Orleck, “Introduction: The War on Poverty from the Grass Roots Up,” 10.

residents of the areas and members of the groups served.”⁸²

The federal government channeled resources into the Appalachian region through a number of programs, all a part of either the Economic Opportunity Act or the regionally-specific Appalachian Regional Development Act of 1965. The Appalachian Act promised, in the words of Kentucky and West Virginia Senators, “to assist local bodies in the development of the basic resources and facilities on which economic growth depends” and to serve the national interest “by offering opportunity to those of different generations who want to work toward our national goals and continue to live in this great region.”⁸³ Underlying this act were widely-held beliefs that without new roads, highways, water systems, vocational schools, and overall infrastructure development, industries would not succeed in the region and Appalachian residents would need to move to cities or continue to face poverty and a depressed economy.

While the Appalachian Act promised to change the region’s economic infrastructure over the long haul, the Economic Opportunity Act addressed more immediate concerns, such as education, employment, and access to healthcare and welfare benefits. It eventually created an opening for low-income people to participate in developing and managing antipoverty programs. In the beginning, however, local governments were often loathe to include community people and poor people in programs except in cursory ways. In fact, President Johnson was not fond of the idea of community action that circumvented local government, but his aides and the administrators of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) created a path for grassroots

⁸² Act of August 20, 1964 (Economic Opportunity Act of 1964), Public Law 88-452, 78 STAT 508, Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-2011, Record Group 11, National Archives, <http://research.archives.gov/description/299896>.

⁸³ Senators John Sherman Cooper and Jennings Randolph, “The Appalachian Development Act: A Statement for the 40th Anniversary of Mountain Life and Work,” *Mountain Life and Work* XL, no. 1 (Summer 1965).

activists to join the programs.⁸⁴

In Appalachia and throughout the South, local governments and political machines proved the greatest obstacles to community participation in antipoverty programs, despite the federal government's efforts to the contrary. Developed under Title II of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 to provide funding to government programs and non-profit organizations, Community Action Programs were often the battle grounds where power struggles unfolded. The very idea of CAPs came under fire within Johnson's administration, producing political tensions that haunted the program throughout the 1960s. President Johnson made clear in personal conversations about the Economic Opportunity Act that the War on Poverty should assist local governments with putting people to work. He once angrily stated that he "set up poverty [programs] for people to just work like hell and get paid so they have something to eat," not to fund "social workers" and "half-baked organizations."⁸⁵ Johnson resisted the idea that private organizations—such as grassroots community action agencies—should receive government subsidies.

Despite Johnson's objections, the President's Task Force in the War Against Poverty pursued the funding of community action initiatives, seeing the programs as the best way to mobilize poor people and local communities. The OEO channeled federal grants to CAPs so that communities could set up health services and adult education, job and early childhood development programs. As historian Susan Youngblood Ashmore explains, before the bill

⁸⁴ See Guian A. McKee, "This Government is With Us: Lyndon Johnson and the Grassroots War on Poverty," in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History*, 44-46. As Johnson's phone conversations with White House aides reveal, his "vision of community action consisted of 'heads of departments and experienced people' in local and state agencies," 46.

⁸⁵ Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Bertrand Harding, December 6, 1968, 5:38 pm, Citation #13806, in Lyndon B. Johnson White House Recordings, Miller Center, University of Virginia, <http://millercenter.org/presidentialrecordings/lbj-wh6812.01-13806>.

passed, members of the Task Force worried about how well CAPs could function in the segregated South, where, if local governments administered the CAP grants, they could conceivably block the participation of African Americans. Foreseeing challenges in the South, the Task Force built in funding for non-governmental, non-profit organizations and included a clause calling for the “maximum feasible participation of the poor” in CAP funded programs. It hoped to ensure the active involvement of poor people, black and white, and provided avenues for developing antipoverty programs outside of local government structures. By providing funding to both government-controlled Community Action Agencies as well as to non-profit organizations, the bill’s writers hoped to prevent segregationist politicians in the South from hijacking the antipoverty programs and blocking poor black southerners’ access to federal grants.⁸⁶

While to the Task Force southern segregationists were the most direct threat to the idea of community action, the bill’s designers also understood that middle-class professionals and politicians often preferred to “do it for the poor and to the poor, but not with the poor.”⁸⁷ This was especially true in Appalachia, where middle-class reformers had set up missionary societies and settlement schools since the early twentieth century in hopes of solving the problem of poverty in Appalachia. In many eastern Kentucky counties, where the poor white population significantly out-numbered poor African Americans, tensions were less likely to develop around racial segregation and more likely to arise along class and urban/rural lines. The extent of poor people’s participation in CAP programs varied according to visions of program directors, but the

⁸⁶ See Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry It On*, 29-30; Alyosha Goldstein, *Poverty in Common: the Politics of Community Action During the American Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 115-116; William M. Epstein, *Democracy Without Decency: Good Citizenship and the War on Poverty* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 58-63.

⁸⁷ Statement made by Assistant Secretary representing the U.S. Department of Agriculture John Baker, quoted in Ashmore, *Carry it Forward*, 30.

very use of the phrase “maximum feasible participation” spurred debates about the role of poor people in designing and implementing antipoverty programs across all levels of community and government.

The first OEO programs in Appalachia were geared to job creation for male heads of household and did not employ the concept of maximum feasible participation. For example, the Work, Experience and Training Program (WET) was designed to provide jobs, constructive work experience, and skills training for men. From the outset, many saw creating jobs as the major thrust of the War on Poverty, from Johnson’s statements about giving people “work, not handouts” to local men hoping that the government programs would infuse the region with jobs. One government administrator stated that if jobs programs for men failed, “the programs...and the poor themselves, will go down the drain.”⁸⁸

The notion that creating jobs was the key to ending poverty in Appalachia was flawed in two important ways. First, it ignored the fact that women and children made up the majority of the poor and that women performed unpaid domestic labor. Second, it rested on the notion that all men should be able to find employment with salaries that could support families, an assumption that created the illusion that welfare and wage work were diametric contradictions. The program failed to address the consequences of a depressed and single-industry economy in Appalachia where families struggled with high rates of disabled and unemployed male workers, and where there was a real need for public assistance. The political desire to provide jobs rather than welfare—and to see the two options as mutually exclusive—came into direct conflict with the economic realities of the industrial Appalachian economy, which had declined rapidly after the post-World War II boom. In the first year of the War on Poverty in Appalachia, officials of antipoverty programs and male trainees and workers struggled to reconcile a need for jobs and a

⁸⁸ Larry Greathouse, “The Weaknesses are Appearing,” *Mountain Life and Work* XL, no. 3 (Fall 1965).

need for welfare assistance.

Despite these early limitations, conversations about welfare eventually shifted as more women and mothers joined the War on Poverty ranks and as anti-poverty workers began to address the structural reasons for poverty in Appalachia. The notion of “maximum feasible participation” was key to this transition; local organizations that were controlled by community people turned out to hold more promising opportunities for poor people than the job programs in Appalachia. Not only did many people find employment opportunities in local organizations, they were also empowered by their positions.

The Office of Economic Opportunity-funded programs, the Appalachian Volunteers and Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), were key to the development of grassroots leadership and community-driven antipoverty organizations. President Johnson and Sargent Shriver, the director of the OEO, conceived of VISTA as the domestic version of Peace Corps. VISTA recruited recent college graduates interested in community and service work and appointed them to War on Poverty programs throughout the nation. In Appalachia, many VISTA workers went to work in the programs of the Appalachian Volunteers, an independent organization funded largely by the OEO and directed in its early years by the progressive regional organization the Council of the Southern Mountains.⁸⁹

As poor people joined organizations, pressed their political desires in local districts, and shook up power structures in their counties, they faced the reality that local power brokers were not going to give up power or money easily. The battle for resources played out between local government-controlled CAPs—made up of middle-class, town people—and VISTA and AV workers. Early on, local government-controlled community agencies questioned the use of outsider community organizers. Their criticisms of outsider volunteers would grow more pointed

⁸⁹ Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer*; Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals*.

over time, but even within the first year of the programs they did not embrace the volunteer programs. For instance, in Eula Hall's home county of Floyd, the CAP showed little enthusiasm for the services of VISTA workers, who ideally would provide a bridge between local politicians and poor communities, but who were also perceived as radical by some local officials. Of the fifteen VISTA workers assigned to the Floyd County CAP, only two completed their service, with the rest citing mismanagement and a lack of direction, moral support, and resources. By 1966, the Floyd County CAP had been subsumed under the six-county, area-wide Big Sandy Community Action Program. Under the leadership of Harry Eastburn, the CAP became even more resistant to outsider antipoverty workers. Eastburn explained that he would not bring VISTA workers into the CAP without a Washington appointed supervisor; yet, OEO ultimately refused to assign a VISTA supervisor to the regional organization, citing hostility from the CAP's leadership. In the early years, Eastburn and others like him were less likely to cite specific reasons not to accept resources from VISTA, but as the War on Poverty continued, VISTA and AVs came under fire as radicals and outsiders bent on starting a proletarian revolution.⁹⁰

Reverend William G. Poole, a member of the Floyd County Improvement Association, argued that the CAP seemed more interested in employing professionals than community organizers. The CAP staff included one area director, three assistant directors, a clinical social worker and a psychologist, eleven aides, one accountant, a grant writer, and two secretaries, but no grassroots recruiters, positions that Poole argued could be filled by VISTAs. Poole criticized the local CAP for not fulfilling its duty to "be in touch with all the diverse elements of the county community" and for failing to solicit community interest and provide grant applications to groups that could possibly sponsor VISTA. The Floyd County CAP and others would come

⁹⁰ Citizens Report by Rev. William G. Poole, November 1966, Box 8, Folder 4, AV Records.

under scrutiny throughout the War on Poverty for refusing to implement the programs requested by poor people or to include them in planning or on the CAP board.⁹¹

In contrast to the Big Sandy CAP, organizations like the 979 Community Action Council, a conglomeration of local residents and antipoverty workers in Floyd County, were much truer to the notion of maximum feasible participation. With the help of Appalachian Volunteers, the group formed in 1965 along the major highway of the Mud Creek area. Members from each of the twelve hollows in the Mud Creek district addressed the major issues facing its over 6000 residents. Unlike the CAP, the council relied largely on the decision-making of local people, who determined through community meetings to establish a community newspaper, open summer and pre-schools, and conduct research for a new water system.⁹²

In August 1966, after a little less than a year of community meetings and organizing, representatives from the Mud Creek area and dozens of others from Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia joined the Appalachian Community Meeting in Washington, D.C. to discuss the extent of volunteer and community people's problems with CAPs. Their report "The Problem of Participation in Community Action Programs: Impressions and Suggestions" opened, "These writings express some of the hopes and frustrations, the opinions and suggestions of the people of the Appalachian South. They record the diversity and complexity of the Appalachian Region as well as a shared experience of poverty and a heritage of economic and political exploitation." The trip to Washington, D.C. was the culmination of "many smaller meetings in the hollows, the coal camps and towns" and "the result of a sharing of experiences and ideas between community people and Appalachian Volunteers." The community representatives and AVs offered

⁹¹ Ibid; "Report on Community Action Efforts of Appalachian Volunteers from Prestonsburg Office," by Flem Messer 1966, Quarterly Staff Reports, Box 8, Folder 4, AV Records. See also Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 95, 127.

⁹² "Future Appalachian Volunteer Operations in Floyd County, Kentucky," 1966, Box 8, Folder 4, AV Records.

suggestions for the future of the War on Poverty in Appalachia. Their central proposal was for the Community Action Programs at the county level to actively and meaningfully include low-income people on the board of directors and in planning meetings. They also called for more funding to be channeled to the community action agencies at the local level, where poor people had greater involvement and a central role in planning, as well as for better communication between all levels of War on Poverty organizations. Most importantly, they requested that poor people be given not just nominal representation on boards and committees, but “the most powerful kind of local control: financial.”⁹³ Such meetings had little effect on the structure of government-controlled CAPs, but these conversations provided energy and vision to a growing grassroots movement.

Tensions over the goals of the War on Poverty and who had access to its programs and resources continued to unfold during the height of the federal anti-poverty programs. Local poor people rarely campaigned for changes in the local political system or social services without a fight with local elites. The tug-of-war revealed deep divisions over how to interpret the phrase “war on poverty.” Some local politicians saw federal dollars as an opportunity to extend services they already provided, services that rarely involved input from poor people. At the same time, local people—such as Eula Hall and Edith Easterling—harnessed the resources of the poverty programs to make significant changes in their communities and in their own lives. Volunteers who came to Appalachia to work saw the opportunity to join a movement and to participate in national politics. More radical volunteers, wary of government bureaucracy, nevertheless saw the programs as a way to extend the goals of the civil rights movement. For many, the War on Poverty became a vehicle by which community movements mobilized, building on the cross-

⁹³ Appalachian Community Meeting, Washington, D.C., “The Problem of Participation in Community Action Programs: Impressions and Suggestions,” August 21-22, 1966, Box 8, Folder 7, AV Records.

generational alliances between local and outsider antipoverty workers.

Youth and the Civil Rights Milieu

The anti-poverty campaigns in 1960s Appalachia were almost always, even if indirectly, influenced by the ideas and rhetoric of the civil rights movement. Thomas Rhodenbaugh, an early staff person of the Appalachian Volunteers, summed up the energy and idealism of the War on Poverty and how, to many activists, it was intertwined with the major movements of the time:

It was an era when the civil rights movement was going on; it was an era when the war protests were occurring; there was a feeling that young people could turn the world around. It was just a matter of time [...] In a sense the AVs were viewing themselves as a civil rights movement within the region to some degree. Many of the models that were used, particularly as the program moved toward a more action agenda were approaches used in the civil rights movement...There was also this basic belief that young people could turn it around. It was probably naive, but there was an energy there that I never experienced in any other employment in my life. You felt like you were a part of a social movement. So we were in Appalachia, but we were part of a broader social movement stream.⁹⁴

Rhodenbaugh's characterization of activism in Appalachia as part of "a broader social movement stream" eloquently captures the idea that he and others perceived it as never far-removed from other movements addressing the meaning of democracy in the country. The ideas of the civil rights, student, and anti-war movements flowed with and through the antipoverty movements in Appalachia.⁹⁵

Few imagine eastern Kentucky as a place where the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s played a significant role. In one sense they would be correct; black communities in

⁹⁴ Thomas Rhodenbaugh, interview by Rice and Kiffmeyer.

⁹⁵ On approaches to the history of the 1960s and 1970s social movements, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," and Van Gosse, "A Movement of Movements: The Definition and Periodization of the New Left."

eastern Kentucky were not ground zero for the state's civil rights battles, with most of the major campaigns taking place in Frankfort, Louisville, and Lexington.⁹⁶ While some black activists in Appalachia spoke out about civil rights, the small population of African Americans in the mountains could not have sustained a mass movement; and with mechanization and mine closings in the 1950s, many African American families in eastern Kentucky coal towns left the state in search of new opportunities, just as the civil rights movement was taking shape.⁹⁷

Yet the civil rights movement did have significant effects on eastern Kentucky communities, especially when one considers the reach of its message. There were small, localized efforts to put the movement into play in some eastern Kentucky towns. Just as in more urban cities, racial segregation defined most coal towns, where white workers and their families lived in one coal camp and black workers and their families lived in another. They had separate churches and neighborhoods, and, until the 1960s, they had separate schools. While white and black coal miners worked in the same mines, black coal miners often worked in worse conditions than whites. Activist Julia Cowans of Evarts, Kentucky, started a chapter of the NAACP in her Harlan County community and helped youth start sit-in campaigns in the city of Harlan, where African Americans were refused service at some businesses. But she also noted that many of her black neighbors did not support her and her husband's activism because they feared retribution from whites.⁹⁸ African Americans were more likely to find support to fight both racial and

⁹⁶ Catherine Fosl and Tracy E. K'Meyer, ed., *Freedom on the Border: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement in Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009); Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Tracy Elaine K'Meyer, *From Brown to Meredith: The Long Struggle for School Desegregation in Louisville, Kentucky, 1954-2007* and *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South: Louisville, Kentucky, 1945-1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009).

⁹⁷ See Fosl and K'Meyer, "Introduction," *Freedom on the Border*.

⁹⁸ "Julia Cowans," *Freedom on the Border*, 177-185.

economic oppression within the United Mine Workers of America.; some of the most prominent black activists in the Appalachian South were leaders in the UMWA, the first union in the United States to officially prohibit against racial discrimination.⁹⁹

While the black-led civil rights movement in eastern Kentucky paled in comparison to the movement in strong black enclaves in Louisville and other cities in the state, many civil rights leaders nonetheless saw the mountains as an important battleground for the future of a broad-based, interracial movement. In 1965, as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee began to shift to Black Power, leading eventually to a separation from white activists, white SNCC members discussed how they could contribute to the black freedom struggle by building coalitions and support for the movement in white, working-class communities. With its long history of labor radicalism and working-class solidarity, eastern Kentucky seemed like a prime place to organize working-class whites into an interracial coalition. The War on Poverty in Appalachia provided the perfect opportunity to try out these ideas.¹⁰⁰

In the spring and summer of 1964, Myles Horton of the Highlander Research and Education Center, an organizing base for the movement that is located in the Tennessee foothills, recruited students from the white student project of SNCC for a series of workshops. Horton's goal was to train students "in community organization, work with the unemployed, and acquaint them with President Johnson's plans for War on Poverty." He drew explicit links between the

⁹⁹ Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 174. See also Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1987).

¹⁰⁰ See "Mountain Feminist: Helen Matthews Lewis, Appalachian Studies, and the Long Women's Movement," compiled and ed. Jessica Wilkerson and David P. Cline, *Southern Cultures* (Fall 2011); Gregg L. Michel, *Struggle for a Better South: The Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1964-1969* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Appalachian Workshops and White Community Project Workshops, "Grassroots Social Activism: Records of the Highlander Folk School and Highlander Research and Education Center, 1932-1978," microfilm (Woodbridge, CT: Primary Source Microfilm, 2007).

War on Poverty and the civil rights movement when he stated, “It is encouraging to find Southern students concerned with the problems of white people in underdeveloped areas of the South as well as with the problems of civil rights. The war on poverty and the struggle for civil rights cannot be separated.”¹⁰¹ Over the course of the antipoverty movement, local and outsider white activists journeyed to the Highlander Center to strategize and participate in organizing workshops.

For many of the young outsiders who worked in War on Poverty organizations, the relationship between civil rights and the antipoverty movement was clear. For instance, Gibbs Kindermann, one of the first staff people for the Appalachian Volunteers, had been a SNCC worker in Mississippi before he joined the War on Poverty in Appalachia. VISTA worker Elinor Graham was also influenced by civil rights activism. In the early 1960s she worked at the East Harlem Protestant Parish where activists addressed housing problems and poverty. The Parish sponsored a visit by SNCC activists, who ended up staying with Graham. She later met SNCC organizers of the Mississippi Freedom Party while she was an intern at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C. Through these encounters and the discussions she had, Graham became aware of SNCC’s call for white activists to build coalitions in white communities, an idea that informed her decision to work in white Appalachian communities.¹⁰² Student civil rights organizations also made connections to the mountains. For instance, the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC), made up of progressive white students from fifteen southern college campuses, distributed a series of working papers on how to organize white communities.

¹⁰¹ Press Release, Highlander Center, 2 March 1964, “Grassroots Social Activism: Records of the Highlander Folk School.”

¹⁰² Elinor Graham, Penelope Crandall, Ruth Yarrow Baker, and Helen Wrentch interview with the author, March 11, 2011.

SSOC members determined “to build together a New South which brings democracy and justice for all its people,” and they outlined as some of their goals “the rise of full and equal opportunity for all” and “an end to personal poverty and deprivation.”¹⁰³ SSOC was also in touch with the leadership of the Appalachian Volunteers about how they could contribute to the anti-poverty programs in Appalachia, which reached out mostly to whites.¹⁰⁴ Lastly, the SCLC recruited white Appalachian activists to the Poor People’s Campaign in the late 1960s

While some white activists had joined marches and organizations of the civil rights movement, others had been touched by and motivated by the civil rights activism they watched on the news, read about in the newspapers, or heard about on college campuses. Sue Ella Kobak, who kept track of the movement occurring across the South, recalled being heartbroken when she watched the evening news and learned that civil rights workers in Mississippi had been murdered. Later, she came to see the Appalachian Movement and its goals in kinship with the Black Power movement.¹⁰⁵ Outsider activists also brought with them a range of experiences and memories related to the civil rights movement. Some had attended schools as they were going through the process of desegregation; others had friends and siblings who had participated in the Freedom Rides and in SNCC; many of them came from colleges where they were discussing and debating the best way to achieve greater equality in the country. Many of the young people who joined VISTA and the Appalachian Volunteers believed in the transformative power of the black freedom struggle, not just in the lives and experiences of African Americans, but for all Americans.

¹⁰³ “Southern Student Organizing Committee,” Civil Rights Movement Veterans, online archive, hosted by Tougaloo College, <http://www.crmvet.org/tim/timhis64.htm#1964ssoc>.

¹⁰⁴ See Emmie Shrader, “Poor Whites and the Movement,” and Kimberly Moody, “Organizing Poor Whites,” as well as “SSOC conference notes,” Box 58, Folder 10, Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1965-1966, AV Records.

¹⁰⁵ Sue Ella Kobak, interview with the author, May 2011.

In their free time antipoverty volunteers often gathered at the homes of their local allies or at community centers, where they discussed politics and sang protest songs. Edith and Jake Easterling helped to foster these discussions by providing a space where young people mingled, discussed ideas, made music, and even found romantic partners. Edith feared that some of the young activists—whom she believed were emblematic of the counterculture—would not be welcomed into the community. She took it upon herself to bring them to her house, feed them, and show them around. The young activists would sit around and play music, and sometimes they would talk through the night. Her memories of this period are peopled with activists from across the country, including the cultural workers Guy and Candie Carawan from the Highlander Center and the organizers of the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project. Student activists from Kentucky, Connecticut, and New York found a place at the Easterling's to discuss and debate and learn. The mix of characters attests to the diversity of ideas and eagerness of antipoverty workers in eastern Kentucky to build support for an interracial, economic justice movement. And as was so often the case in the Deep South civil rights struggles, older, local people were the ones who fostered these relationships as they offered up their homes and their hospitality.¹⁰⁶

“Good Resource People”: Volunteers in Appalachia

Many eastern Kentucky residents had their first and most direct contact with War on

¹⁰⁶ Easterling, interview by Kline. For other examples of cross-generational alliances, see Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, 2nd edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) and Sarah Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). In 1967, the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project performed in eastern Kentucky as part of its Appalachian Mountain Festival tour. The project, organized by white folk singer Anne Romaine and black gospel and folk singer Bernice Johnson Reagon, brought together white and black traditional musicians who performed together in a powerful display of interracial solidarity. Musicians, including Romaine, associated with the Appalachian Tour of the project stayed with the Easterlings when they performed in Pike County. “Collection Overview” and “Biographical Information,” Anne Romaine Papers, 1935-1995, Southern Folklife Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/r/Romaine,Anne.html>.

Poverty programs through the Appalachian Volunteers (AVs) and VISTA workers, who were often placed under the supervision of the AVs. The Council of the Southern Mountains founded the Appalachian Volunteers early in 1964 when it sent college students to eastern Kentucky communities to repair school buildings. The Council was founded in 1913 after missionary teachers John C. Campbell and Olive Dame Campbell of Massachusetts toured the region and concluded that missionaries and reformers needed a venue where they could share ideas about how to bring greater prosperity to the hills. In the first several decades of its existence, the Council primarily organized an annual conference where college educators and administrators, members of missionary societies, and heads of settlement schools came together to hear lectures on current social topics. After the organization nearly collapsed financially, Perley F. Ayer, a rural sociologist who had taught at Berea College in Kentucky, became the executive director in 1951 and transformed the Council. By the 1960s, it was the largest social reform organization in the region. With its deep roots in the region, it was an obvious choice to house the early Appalachian Volunteers.¹⁰⁷

Drawn mostly from nearby colleges and universities, the volunteers started as tutors and teachers for low-income children.¹⁰⁸ Their activities soon broadened, as they organized community meetings, potluck dinners, and “community sings.” They also helped communities

¹⁰⁷ See Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer*; Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 41-42; Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals*, 17-18; “Guide to the Council of the Southern Mountain Records, 1912-1970,” The Council of the Southern Mountain Records, Southern Appalachian Archives, Berea College Special Collections and Archives.

¹⁰⁸ Some historians have criticized these early programs as misguided liberal policies that failed to address structural problems and instead focused on the culture of poor individuals and families, but those critiques underestimated the ways in which early War on Poverty programs laid the groundwork for a longer and broader social movement in the region, see Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals* and Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer*. Ronald D. Eller has argued that despite their flaws, 1960s antipoverty programs in Appalachia were important factors in the developing social justice movements in Appalachia. See *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*. For other examples of how War on Poverty programs buttressed local activism, see Naples *Grassroots Warriors*; Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace*; Adina Back, “Parent Power”: Evelina LÓpez Antonetty, the United Bronx Parents, and the War on Poverty,” in *The War on Poverty*.

tackle problems such as bad roads and a lack of adult education programs, and they organized alongside locals to build school lunchrooms and other school-related infrastructure and to establish school lunch programs. The 1965 annual report concluded, “In a general sense, we have seen that people—children, parents, college students—can do much more than the world expects of them if someone will only give them the opportunity to act, someone with confidence in their ability to succeed and the courage to let them make their own mistakes.”¹⁰⁹

For the individuals and communities who took advantage of them, War on Poverty programs could have significant impacts. The AVs’ early forays into communities sent a message that the government’s War on Poverty could substantially change people’s lives for the better. Children received new books and tutoring outside of regular class time. Volunteers constructed parks and recreational areas. Others offered educational programs for adults, such as GED programs and information sessions about birth control. These may seem like minor offerings, but to the people who received these resources, the difference between having and not having could be profound.

In quarterly reports, volunteers frequently offered anecdotes from their work in communities. For instance, in 1965 a volunteer shared a story of how the antipoverty program influenced one woman’s life. The volunteer began by describing the twenty-seven year old woman’s life: she married to get away from home, she had six children, and her life had turned into “nothing but work and babies.” With the guidance of antipoverty programs, she learned how “to control birth,” and she started an adult education class that she attended at night while her husband watched the children. She was soon to graduate and had begun to think about attending

¹⁰⁹ “Report on Appalachian Volunteers Activities, 1965,” Box 8, Folder 1, AV Records.

college and someday becoming a teacher.¹¹⁰

While the young, outsider poverty workers provided important support, the success of volunteer programs depended on local people shaping their goals. Many of the young volunteers were already committed to the idea of maximum feasible participation and participatory democracy before they arrived. The organizations nonetheless struggled against pervasive theories that explained poverty as a culture and set of traits that could be inherited from parents. Interactions between volunteers and local people led to productive tensions that called these preconceptions into question. The annual VISTA report from 1966 speaks to these tensions. With rhetoric echoing the writer Michael Harrington and others who mourned the high levels of poverty in affluent America, the report stated that the VISTA associates taught “the children of Appalachia, the inheritors of a legacy of apathy and surrender,” and they worked with their parents, “who have not yet given out like the coal, who want something better for their children, and who will work to get it.” The report went on to state adamantly that the key to the success of these programs lay in the ability of the antipoverty programs to attract local people to serve as the leaders and workers in the programs: “These men and women are the potential leaders of an area marked by the striking absence of people between the ages of 20 and 40; volunteer service will develop leadership potential and it may help the outflow of young Appalachian talent for the cities of the North. In the area of immediate concern, local Volunteers know how to approach their own people and how best to go about organizing them for effective community action.”¹¹¹ While this report reflected the culture-of-poverty theory, which focused less on systemic explanations for poverty and more on the supposedly inherited habits and customs that led to poverty, it also pointed to the importance of agency and self-determination in Appalachian

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ “VISTA Associates in 1966,” October 28, 1966, Box 8, Folder 4, AV Records.

communities.

When college students joined the volunteer programs, they first went through a ten-day training that was meant to teach them skills and tactics for developing relationships with community members so that they could effectively organize. Volunteers learned about the communities in which they would be living; they participated in role-playing activities; and they read Jack Weller's *Yesterday's People*, a study of the so-called mountaineer folk culture. The training program was not without flaws. Weller's book was woefully simplistic and seemed to blame the mountaineers' culture for the region's poverty, and the programs often failed to recognize the cultural and ethnic diversity of mountain communities.¹¹²

Yet the training programs also offered the opportunity to ask tough questions about the roots of poverty in Appalachia. As part of their preparation, many volunteers read Harry Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* and were catapulted into political thinking about land ownership and mineral rights in Appalachia. In 1966 Appalachian historian and Berea College faculty Richard Drake developed the "Appalachian Volunteers Reader." With excerpts from a range of texts, including Gunnar Myrdal's *The Challenge to Affluence*, the reader pushed volunteers to raise questions about the political and economic history of the region. Moreover, it provided a critical framework that urged the students to connect history and politics and to use this knowledge to organize communities. For instance, in a section titled "the Great Era of American Capitalism," Drake asked the volunteers to consider which large corporations operated in their community and to find out which properties they owned, how many jobs they created, and how much they paid in taxes. Volunteers entered communities with plentiful intellectual

¹¹² Jack Weller, *Yesterday's People*; Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals*, 111-112.

tools that sharpened as they worked with local people in developing antipoverty projects.¹¹³

Once they were in place, volunteers often worked closely with local people to develop plans of action for putting War on Poverty resources to work. Elinor Graham's story is instructive. An Antioch student who had taken courses with Saul Alinsky and been involved in the civil rights movement in New York, Graham moved to Myers Fork, a mountain farming community in Minifree County, Kentucky, in 1965 with one of the early waves of poverty workers. Many of the families were subsistence and small crop farmers, and men had to travel away from the county to find work in the mines or factories. The one-room school house in the community had been closed. Children could take a bus to a neighboring community's school, but many gave up on school altogether. When Graham arrived in the community, she moved in with the family of Richard "Hoot" Back, the unofficial community organizer of Myers Fork who provided food to neighbors in need and helped sick people get to the hospital. Back talked to Graham about the history of Myers Fork, and he discussed his understanding of the roots of poverty in the area, mainly that children lacked educational opportunities. Back also gave Graham a lesson in local politics, telling her who owned land, who controlled the allotment of tobacco crops and who made decisions about the school. Graham lived with the Backs for the first month of her year-long stint. Then, as a "demonstration of her commitment," she moved to the back of the hollow, two miles off the road. She lived with the Centers, an elderly couple who owned land and grew tobacco; Estie Center was a granny mid-wife and was no doubt well-connected in the community. From the Centers, Graham learned about mountain traditions, including farming and cooking practices and traditional songs. Graham had grown up on a farm

¹¹³ "Appalachian Volunteers Reader," compiled by Richard Drake, Part II, Box 4, Folder 1, AV Records.

in rural Washington, so she eagerly helped the Centers' perform chores on the farm and around the house.¹¹⁴

Graham and Back began holding community meetings, and the community decided that the most pressing need was for roads and bridges so that families who lived in the sometimes impassible hollow could travel more easily. Community delegates petitioned the county judge for funding for a new road and three bridges. The judge promised to provide a bulldozer and lumber, and men in the Work, Experience and Training—or “happy pappy”—program provided employment for local men to work on the projects. Once the men built the roads and bridges, the community petitioned the state for electricity along the road, and Graham requested the help of student volunteers from a local university to help construct three new houses in the community.¹¹⁵

Yet, as Back had told Graham early on, little could change if children did not have the space and resources to learn. In the summer of 1965 Graham put together a summer school program for local youth. Revealing the dearth of educational resources in Miniffee County, a letter from Graham to the Kentucky Department of Education requested books for the school, a book mobile to be sent to the county, films and other enrichment materials, and teachers who might be willing to travel to the area and assist the volunteers. She received a scolding letter in return: the supervisor of libraries informed Graham that they knew of no teachers who could help her, they had no audio-visual materials for loan, and she lacked the training to teach reading skills. The supervisor did, however, offer Graham a box of books for loan, but someone would have had to travel to Frankfort and pick them up. The supervisor seemed unconcerned with the

¹¹⁴ Elinor Graham, interview by Carrie Kline, March 11, 2011, Southern Appalachian Archives, Berea College.

¹¹⁵ Elinor Graham, interview with author, March 12, 2011, in author's possession; Graham, interview by Kline.

fact that the children did not have these resources in the first place and worried that Graham did not meet the criteria for a teacher. Nonetheless, Graham politely accepted the supervisor's offer of books. Then she moved on to the next hurdle: applying for surplus food commodities so that the children would have snacks and lunch during their summer program. She was much more successful on that front, receiving milk, meat, and staple items from the Department of Agriculture. Local families supplemented the meals with fresh vegetables from their own gardens.¹¹⁶

After a year of service, Elinor Graham decided to leave Kentucky and go to medical school, with plans to return to Appalachia once she had become a doctor, and Richard Back took over her position as the local volunteer. Graham felt that she needed a more concrete skill to offer impoverished communities. Her experiences in classes with Saul Alinsky and meeting community organizers in Chicago taught her that the best community organizers were people who used highly developed skills to contribute to social change. Organizers like Graham had the luxury of going to and leaving Appalachia when the need arose, to attend school, to find another job, or simply to visit family. Antipoverty programs could not rely only on outsider young people for success. The local people who became involved in the War on Poverty not only sustained community programs, but guided them as well.

Sue Ella Kobak was eager to participate in the War on Poverty and quickly brought her mother Edith Easterling aboard the programs, too. Both women shaped the local War on Poverty and the movements related to it: Sue Ella as part of a burgeoning youth movement in Appalachia that fed the early volunteer programs, and Edith by developing community programs and eventually helping to establish the Marrowbone Folk School. Their stories bring into focus the motivations and visions of local antipoverty workers.

¹¹⁶ "Graham, Elinor, VISTA, 1965," Box 115, Folder 9, AV Records.

Sue Ella resembles her mother Edith Easterling in many ways. Both have reddish brown hair and broad faces with high cheek bones; both are known for being resolute when they make decisions and take political stances. While her mother was one of many middle-aged mothers to join the War on Poverty, Sue Ella represents a generation of Appalachians who saw the federal programs as an opportunity to join the wave of youth movements across the country. While many of the youth who got involved were from outside the region, a significant number were from eastern Kentucky communities.¹¹⁷

Sue Ella, a bright child who liked to read, always felt different when she was growing up in Poor Bottom Hollow. Looking back on those feelings, she reflected that she was not good at hiding her intelligence, and girls and women who were smart—and revealed that they were smart—threatened traditional family and community values. Edith, however, pushed her oldest daughter to be a high achiever and to pursue a college education when that was not the norm for girls in Appalachian Kentucky. Sue Ella had been born with a dislocated hip that had not been corrected, so she walked with a limp. Fearing that her daughter would not be able to count on the financial stability provided by a husband and marriage, Edith urged her daughter to seek an education and career.¹¹⁸

Sue Ella entered Morehead State University in Morehead, Kentucky, the same year that President Johnson announced the War on Poverty. She hoped that an education would pave the way for a more adventurous life, what she called her “path to the yellow Corvette.” Her plan was to go to college, move to Ohio, become a teacher, and buy a fancy car. Her most important

¹¹⁷ The difference between local and outsider volunteers was that more outsiders, who were also mostly men and all white, were in upper-staff positions. But at the community level, the programs relied on college-aged youth, both local and outsider, for summer work, and sometimes these young people entered more long-term positions. Moreover, the program relied on community volunteers to spread news and participate in projects. Based on chart compiled by Jeanette Knowles, in author’s possession.

¹¹⁸ Kobak, interview with the author, March 2011.

college experiences, however, took her quickly from consumer desires to a deeper analysis of where she came from and the meaning of poverty in Appalachia. Like many college students in the 1960s, Sue Ella began to think critically about democracy and the role of government in Americans' lives, but she brought to that analysis her own experience growing up in the coal fields. When Sue Ella was a child, her mother tried to protect her from the realities of class disparity. Edith had told her that the world portrayed by television programs—the clothing, furniture, houses—did not reflect reality for anybody. Edith Easterling reassured her daughter: “That was what we wanted but that’s not what anybody had.” Sue Ella remembers, “It wasn’t until I went to college that I found out that she had lied to me.” She continues, “[I] didn’t know I was poor until I went to college and saw all these girls wearing all these clothes and I had no idea that people had that.” Sue Ella had fifty dollars, an umbrella, and a suitcase full of second-hand clothes.¹¹⁹

At her college convocation in 1964, Sue Ella heard Bill Wells, a staff person for the Appalachian Volunteers, speak about the AVs and about the mission of the poverty workers. Late that year Sargent Shriver and the Office of Economic Opportunity committed the first substantial grant of nearly \$300,000 to the Appalachian Volunteers.¹²⁰ The Council opened four AV offices in eastern Kentucky, including one in Morehead. Curious about what she heard in Wells’ speech, Sue Ella attended the first meeting of the AVs on her campus, and she became a committed member for her four years of college. When she started the program, she mostly worked as a tutor and helped to repair one-room school buildings in Elliot and Carter Counties. It was not long before she saw the miserable conditions in Appalachian schools as connected to

¹¹⁹ Kobak, interview by the author, March 2011.

¹²⁰ Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals*, 89.

larger problems, such as a lack of political representation for the poor.¹²¹

Sue Ella also joined other elements of the youth movement. She co-edited an underground, radical newspaper at Morehead, and her work in the antipoverty programs soon connected her to the Highlander Research and Education Center, where she became a regular participant. She also founded the Appalachian Student Organizing Committee, modeled after the Southern Student Organizing Committee. Sue Ella became part of a national youth movement that analyzed social and economic issues. Her work with the Appalachian Volunteers also put her in touch with people who had access to resources that might be put to good use in her home community.¹²²

Through the AVs Sue Ella met Thomas Rhodenbaugh, who worked in program's central office. He was one among people in their twenties who found their way to Appalachia in the mid-1960s. The Appalachian Volunteers attracted young, idealistic people from across the country who heeded President Kennedy's and Johnson's calls for America's youth to serve their country by volunteering their time and talents in poverty-stricken areas. Rhodenbaugh had attended Loyola University in Chicago, where he met Richard Boone of the U.S. Department of Justice. Boone was one of the people behind the idea of "maximum feasible participation" and the greater involvement of poor people in antipoverty programs. During college Rhodenbaugh had worked in programs for urban Appalachian migrants. Noting Rhodenbaugh's interest in Appalachian culture and problems, Boone helped put him in touch with Milton Ogle, the director of the AV program, who soon gave him one of the first staff positions.¹²³

¹²¹ Kobak, interview with the author, March 2011; Kobak, interview by Kinderman.

¹²² Kobak, interview with the author, March and May 2011.

¹²³ Rhodenbaugh, interview by Rice and Kiffmeyer.

By the time Sue Ella met Thomas Rhodenbaugh, she had already been thinking about her home community in Pike County and how the AVs could be of service there. She also saw the chance for her mother—a consummate political and community worker—to get involved. She soon invited Rhodenbaugh to Poor Bottom Hollow to meet Edith and helped to establish an AV organization.¹²⁴

In the summer of 1966, Edith helped to place volunteers in the homes of community people. She broadcast news of the volunteers to her neighbors and asked if anyone would house the student workers; in return they would be paid for room and board, and they could help direct the students' work, by having them tutor children in the household or start recreational programs in the community. By 1967 Edith was an employee of the Appalachian Volunteers, one of the few women in the position of “fieldman.” The fieldmen communicated directly with the central office and oversaw programming in the county assigned to them.

Once involved, the Easterlings and other local people organized resources and built networks to tackle the everyday problems that people faced. As locally-led programs cropped up in community after community, people began to ask questions about why poverty existed in the first place and started to imagine how they might remake their communities.

Creating Community Spaces, 1966-1968

Women faced unique physical and social barriers in the rural, coal-mining region that the War on Poverty helped to remedy. Networks and pathways are important in social organizing, but especially so in a place where people, consumer goods, and public spaces were dispersed, and where steep ridges and mountains made traveling difficult. The social landscape of Kentucky, moreover, displayed class and gender in particular ways. With the dominance of the

¹²⁴ Kobak, interview with author, March; Easterling, interview by Kinderman.

coal industry and the relative isolation of the region from major cities and highways, women had few options for employment other than a few service jobs. County seats were not only the bastions of men, but men with relative power and wealth, often connected to coal operations. Antipoverty programs changed the social dynamic in many mountain communities, as poor and working-class women and men built coalitions and altered social spaces by creating new spaces and entering old ones.¹²⁵

When local and outsider volunteers came together, one of the first issues they addressed was the lack of places where they could hold community meetings and make plans for their campaigns. Early reports by the Appalachian Volunteers noted that they held meetings and workshops wherever they could secure space: schoolhouses, churches, barns, empty garages, abandoned stores and houses.¹²⁶ They soon began to discuss the creation of community centers where members could gather, discuss the future of their community, and build fruitful alliances. They also made plans for intellectual spaces and began publishing newsletters, in which they spread word of antipoverty programs, reported on campaigns, and evaluated the success of the War on Poverty.

In Mud Creek community members and anti-poverty workers came together for pie suppers to raise money for community centers, softball games, and picnics. Sometimes as many as 200 people attended meetings. As one report noted, “Through the combination of efforts that

¹²⁵ As Henri Lefebvre notes, “(Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity—their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder....Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others. Among these actions, some serve production, others consumption (i.e. the enjoyment of the fruits of production). Social space implies a great diversity of knowledge.” See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1974), 73.

¹²⁶ Friendly Home Visitors, a group under the North Carolina Fund in the western part of the state, identified “social isolation” as a major problem. The female-led organization saw the need for community spaces where women could share knowledge about social welfare services. See Korstad and Leloudis, *To Rights These Wrongs*, 245.

were carried out in the Mud Creek area, practically every man, woman and child in Mud Creek was directly involved in one or more activities assisted by the summer volunteers and worked on by the community.”¹²⁷ While the volunteers helped to organize these meetings, much of the labor came from local women, who took it upon themselves to spread word about meetings and to feed those in attendance. In eastern Kentucky and throughout the Mountain South, food brought people together. Many residents continued to keep gardens and can foods, and pot luck dinners were community mainstays well before the Appalachian Volunteers arrived. But the AVs brought something new to these gatherings: a sense that the War on Poverty was an exciting political event that local people could participate in and shape to their own needs. As local people and young activists gathered around food, made music, played sports, and danced, they developed bonds, shared ideas, and showed that the War on Poverty was not only about bureaucracies, but also about convergence and exchange.¹²⁸

Youth centers were among the easiest types of community spaces to justify. Volunteers built spaces and programs for youth, from grade school children to teenagers. If there was a dearth of meeting places for adults, there appeared to be even fewer for young people, especially in the summers when school was not in session. Across eastern Kentucky counties, AVs and community activists set up recreation programs, summer schools, teen programs, and 4-H clubs. AVs noted that some communities were so isolated that they were overlooked when counties were setting up Head Start programs. When a pre-school program failed to reach the children

¹²⁷ “Report on Community Action Efforts of Appalachian Volunteers from Prestonsburg Office,” by Flem Messer, 1966, Quarterly Staff Reports, Box 8, Folder 4, AV Records.

¹²⁸ White Papers, Preface, 1966, AVs, Box 8, Folder 4, AV Records.

who needed it the most, they sought ways to bridge the gap, setting up their own preschool programs.¹²⁹

Floyd County had particularly active programs for youth. In the community of Ligon, a local group remodeled a vacant school room into a lunch room that could serve food. Children who had returned home to eat lunch or who brought cornbread and milk in pails could stay on site and receive a healthy meal. The community group requested three summer volunteers in 1966 to help run youth programs, including remedial and recreational programs and a club for teens. In Weeksbury, volunteers set up basketball goals, badminton nets, and swing sets. In the hamlet of Little Mud Creek, residents expressed a deep interest “in betterment for themselves and their children.” After twenty community meetings over the span of six months, the community requested summer volunteers who could help to develop youth programs. When they arrived in 1966, the AVs set up four different centers so as to reach as many children as possible. They reported teaching 50-100 children each day of the program. In all of the above communities, the summer programs grew out of meetings of local people; involved local people in planning; and succeeded in part because the volunteer program responded to requests from the community and worked with local people to make the programs both appealing and useful. Moreover, parents seemed eager to send children to the after-school and summer programs. No doubt mothers, many of whom had a houseful of children, appreciated the reprieve from childcare that these programs provided.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ “Report on Appalachian Volunteers Activities, 1965,” Box 8, Folder 1, AV Records; “History of the AV Eastern Kentucky Program,” AV Quarterly Report, October 1967, Box 8, Folder 9, AV Records; Larry Greathouse, “The Weaknesses are Appearing,” *Mountain Life and Work*, XL, no. 3 (Fall 1965). A field rep for the Council of the Southern Mountains, Greathouse reported that Project Headstart was not reaching the children it was intended for in Appalachia, but had become a “nursery-type school overloaded with children from high-income families.”

¹³⁰ White Papers, Preface, 1966, AVs, Box 8, Folder 4, AV Records.

Many of the youth programs, such as 4-H programs and Boy and Girl Scouts, provided traditional outlets for youth. Occasionally the youth programs became much more political. In Harlan County, Kentucky, the youth club spoke out about daily injustices and offered keen critiques of the systems of power in Harlan County, drawing on the language of the civil rights, student, and free speech movements.

The Harlan County youth group was organized by the Appalachian Volunteer Jeanette Zimek Knowles. Jeanette arrived in Harlan County in 1965 with the American Friends' organization Voluntary International Service Assignment (VISA). She lived and worked in a community on Jones Creek, helping to organize the construction of a hot lunch room at the local one-room school house and distributing clothing to families. She completed her service with VISA, and in 1967 she returned to Harlan County as an Appalachian Volunteer. Jeanette recalls that after sitting around and talking with other community organizers about what was needed in Harlan County, the organizers decided to start a youth program for high school students at Evarts High School. The club brought together a small, interracial group of students who, as one of the former students recalled, were all misfits and not part of the in-crowd at the high school. Students in the group were outspoken, and some of them challenged heterosexual norms—one female student was an avowed tomboy, and several of the young men eventually came out as gay. They also tested racial boundaries; before the youth group officially began, Jeanette had helped to arrange an interracial swim party at an all-white swimming pool in Harlan County. As a group they showed an interest in how the civil rights movement rippled through Harlan County. They also challenged adults and students alike to analyze the roots of poverty in eastern Kentucky.¹³¹

¹³¹ Interview with Jeanette Knowles, Thelma Parker Witt, and Mildred Shackleford by the author, January 2013.

On February 14, 1968, only weeks before he announced that he was entering the presidential primary, Robert Kennedy stopped at a school in Neon, Kentucky, for a hearing on poverty in Appalachia. Students from the Harlan County youth group along with students from southwestern Virginia demonstrated at the hearing. They arrived wearing brown bags on their heads to emphasize that people in positions of power did not see or hear young people in Appalachia. They carried signs stating “poor power,” “no power, no rights, no freedom,” and “we can’t eat your fancy promises.” While at first school administrators told the students they could not participate in the meeting, Kennedy and his aides invited the students inside and asked them to sit in front. One student testified, describing the terrible conditions of the schools and contending that the political machine in Harlan County was in part responsible. The students provided Kennedy with copies of their youth group’s newsletter, which described the poverty of Evarts High School, documented low spending per student in Harlan County, and offered an education on how corporations in the coal industry made riches on the region’s resources, while counties such as Harlan could not raise enough in revenue to fund the school system.¹³²

Calling themselves Youth for a Better Harlan County, the students continued to meet after their demonstration. In early issues of their newsletter, the students focused on their school building. One student took photographs for the newsletter, documenting broken windows, shabby trailers for overflow classes, and a coal tippie that stood only yards from the school. When school administrators found out that the student had photographed the school, he was suspended. To further downplay the students’ exposé, the school principal stated that the student was accompanied by a “long-bearded” person who was driving a jeep with a license plate from another county, insinuating that a radical outsider was leading the youth. Conservative politicians

¹³² *Cloverfork Newsletter*, January 22, 1968, March 21, 1968, and May 27, 1968, Box 129, Folder 16, AV Records.

and county officials in eastern Kentucky frequently employed the trope of the radical outsider when attempting to discount the actions of local people. Attacks on the student group by school administrators only helped to radicalize the students further.¹³³

In the months following their encounter with Robert Kennedy, the Harlan County students began to connect their campaign for a better school to issues across the country. The students were influenced in part by news of the Poor People's Campaign, the effort by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to build an interracial movement of poor people. In May 1968 students publicized the Poor People's Campaign in their newsletter, including a quote from Rev. Ralph Abernathy. The students pre-emptively defended themselves and activists who were part of the Poor People's Campaign from charges of radicalism, stating "they're not communists, Marxists, Leninists, or even extremists. They are people who are tired of being treated as if they didn't exist." They showed support for an interracial movement in which "The Indian, the Negro, the Mexican-America, and the Whites are all poor together and together they can make the United States a place where everyone is prosperous and happy."¹³⁴ In the same issue, the students reported on a high school walkout led by Mexican-American students in Los Angeles, and they drew parallels between the campaigns for better education in Appalachia and those in poor communities across the country.

By July 1968, the youth group renamed itself the Harlan County Youth Liberation Movement, associating themselves with a movement of youth across the country that offered a left critique of corporate power, government bureaucracy, and the war in Vietnam. They also re-titled their publication, formerly the *Cloverfork Newsletter*, *The Youth Movement*. Their stated

¹³³ *Cloverfork Newsletter*, March 21, 1968.

¹³⁴ *Cloverfork Newsletter*, May 27, 1968.

purpose was “to work for better formal education; to inform ourselves and the community; and to improve ourselves, our community, and others in order to bring about a change in the economic and political condition of Harlan County.” Several of the students attended planning meetings for the Poor People’s Campaign in West Virginia, Georgia, and South Carolina. Some also joined the movement in Washington, D.C. where they marched with groups from across the country on Solidarity Day and several days later joined an eastern Kentucky delegation to challenge Kentucky Senator John Cooper to work on behalf of poor people in his state.¹³⁵

While the Appalachian Volunteers preached that education was the best way to lift families out of poverty, the students confronted head-on the barriers to good education. The student paper became the central space for students—often anonymously—to vent their frustrations about living in a community where youth from poor families faced an economy in decline and had little hope of receiving a good education or job. Topics ranged from the discrimination faced by African American students and the meaning of welfare rights to articles about violation of students’ civil liberties. The youth group may have been small—only a handful of students—but they had big voices, and raised issues that many adults felt uncomfortable sharing publicly. On more than one occasion, adults wrote columns in support of the youth movement and encouraged the students to continue speaking out about injustices in the community.

Along with student groups and youth spaces, community leaders and poverty workers sought to address the need for community centers that could host celebrations, adult education programs, workshops, and meetings. Volunteers often noted the remnants of a more prosperous past, when coal companies provided jobs and aided in the building of neighborhoods and town

¹³⁵ *Cloverfork Newsletter*, August 23, 1968.

spaces. One report documented the state of the town of Weeksbury: “The company pulled out several years ago and today poor houses, crumbling coal company office, club, and store buildings serve only as sad reminders of a better past.” The couple of hundred residents lived in old company-owned homes with “long since faded” paint on the walls. The primary goal outlined at town meetings was to arrange for a community center where plans for cooperative housing, sewing clubs, and other programs could be made.¹³⁶

Not only did people gather to discuss antipoverty programs and community development, they also delighted in being together. Given the difficulty of traveling to nearby cities for entertainment, the dances, community suppers, and meetings offered a break from the routine of work. In the bi-racial town of Tram, a community of about 200 people, antipoverty workers leased a building, fixed it up, and turned it into a community and adult education center. They held pie suppers and dances there, with fifty to seventy-five people often in attendance. One eighty-year-old woman attended all the dances and “appeared to receive as much enjoyment as the younger generation.” Some older members of the community were not as supportive of the dancing. Two women, one white and the other black, called in complaints to the CAP office and at the next community meeting made a motion that dancing be banned at the community center. The majority of the community members at the meeting, however, voted to continue to allow dances. It is unclear if the dances were attended by both black and white community members, though the complaints by a white and black woman suggest that the dances were interracial events that possibly bridged divides between otherwise segregated communities. The programs

¹³⁶ “Washington White Paper, Floyd County Report,” Box 8, Folder 4, AV Records.

were so popular in Tram that several community members asked if they could join VISTA and work on behalf of the community full time.¹³⁷

Social gatherings laid the groundwork for difficult conversations about the problems facing the people of eastern Kentucky. For the meetings to be successful—and in the philosophy of the volunteer programs, success meant that community people participated actively—community members had to draw people to the meetings. Eula Hall remembers that her neighbors flocked to meetings. Once there they would discuss issues such as the need for local medical facilities and doctors and the poor quality of drinking water. “We would organize groups together to try to testify and march, picket, or whatever it took to try and get something done to make a difference in our living standards,” Hall remembers.¹³⁸

Hall and her neighbors in Mud Creek began to tackle big issues that affected the quality of their lives. One of their first projects was to petition the state for a modern water system in the rural part of their county. In the summer of 1966, community members began taking surveys about who desired a water system and testing wells for contamination. Hall was one of many community members who helped to gather data. She remembers, “We did a survey and door to door screening, and we found 90 percent had their wells to be contaminated back here. And ours was no exception. Until you got it tested you don’t know what you’re drinking. You’d just dig a hole and get the water out of it.”¹³⁹ Community representatives compiled data and began making a case for a water system at the state and federal level. In June and July 1966 citizens and local officials made three trips to the state capital.

¹³⁷ “Preface,” White Papers, 1966, Box 8, Folder 4, AV Records.

¹³⁸ Eula Hall, interview with the author, September 2012.

¹³⁹ Eula Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad.

One community member captured the scene of the meeting in the local paper committed to reporting on War on Poverty programs, *The Hawk Eye*: “The cool ornate offices of the Governor of Kentucky seem light years away from the grinding poverty of Mud Creek, just as the gently rolling fields and air of gracious affluence that pervades the countryside around Frankfort contrast sharply with the flinty hills and poisonous streams of Floyd County’s hollows. To these spacious chambers in Kentucky’s rich heartland came a delegation of Floyd County officials and private citizens of Mud Creek.” Citizens presented a petition that requested the Governor declare Mud Creek a disaster area in order to qualify for emergency federal and state funds. The director of the Big Sandy CAP joined the delegation and gave weight to the report when he testified that over 90 percent of wells in Ligon, a community located along Mud Creek, were contaminated “with fecal material, 75% of all children in Ligon with from one to three types of worms; the area teetering on the brink of an epidemic.” The Governor subsequently called for emergency wells to be dug in the area and for plans to be put in place for a modern water system.¹⁴⁰

The following month, representatives from Floyd County, including Hall, joined the Appalachian Community Meeting in Washington, D.C., where they again presented preliminary surveys on well contamination, which they linked to underlying quality of life issues: lack of health care, employment opportunities, and hunger. Hall remembers that they practically begged for a grant. Delegates argued that, with a water system in place, industry could be attracted to the area, a fire department could be established, and their communities would be improved.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ *The Hawk Eye*, August 4, 1966, Box 130, Folder 1, AV Records.

¹⁴¹ Appalachian Community Meeting, Washington, D.C. “The Problem of Participation in Community Action Programs: Impressions and Suggestions,” August 21-22, 1966; Eula Hall, interview with the author, 2011.

In neighboring Pike County, Edith Easterling helped establish a community center in the Marrowbone Creek community. In the summer of 1967 local activists distributed a newsletter, which Easterling edited, that spread news of anti-poverty activities in the Marrowbone Creek area, which they described as “a seven mile long holler in the southern part of Pike County.” In the decade after World War II, the Marrowbone Creek area was booming, “Coal was King,” and employable men could find jobs. By the mid-1960s all but the smallest mines had shut down and “suddenly miners and their families were caught in the vice like grip of poverty.” Nothing was left “except the people.”¹⁴² Community members and volunteers tackled a series of needs: they petitioned the state to pave the main road in Marrowbone Creek, assisted people in navigating the local welfare and food stamp programs, organized a teen club, and established a newsletter. Most importantly, they began organizing a community center.

The Marrowbone Folk School’s mission was similar to that of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee: it promoted community knowledge as the foundation for successful social movements. In fact, Easterling’s involvement in the Marrowbone Folk School led to a long relationship with Highlander and its co-founder Myles Horton. Horton visited Marrowbone on several occasions, and Easterling served on Highlander’s board of directors. In its early years in the 1930s Highlander had promoted labor organizing, which had brought its staff into contact with miners and the UMWA. By the 1950s, Highlander had shifted its focus to the burgeoning civil rights movement and provided an educational space for civil rights activists. By the mid-1960s, as the movement evolved, Highlander’s staff began to consider a next phase in social justice organizing, and they turned their attention to antipoverty activism and working-class movements in the Appalachian South, finding a key ally in Easterling.

¹⁴² Marrowbone Folk School Pamphlet, Box 95, Folder 8, Council of the Southern Mountains Records, 1970-1989, Southern Appalachian Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College (hereafter cited as CSM Records II); “The Marrowbone News,” Box 130, Folder 9, AV Records.

After incorporating in June 1967, the organizers of the Marrowbone Folk School compiled a pamphlet to garner support for a “nonprofit education institution” that “seeks to concern itself with the massive social, economic, and political problems of the poor class of people in the Appalachian South.” The pamphlet sought to dispel myths that poor people and mountain people were naturally ignorant, contending that “The Marrowbone Folk School will prove that this is a lie. It will show that when given the opportunity and right information the poor people can and will speak out and come up with their own solutions.” The pamphlet described a folk school as a space for people to discuss local problems and to develop solutions. It was not the kind of school based on textbook learning; rather, the local people’s “daily lives and experiences make up a living textbook.” The school promoted experience over formal education, stating that the people who lived in poverty and struggled to survive knew more about how to solve the problems of poverty than “most of the high salaried poverty warriors.” The school not only promised a space for training community leaders, but also aimed to preserve mountain culture, offering to teach traditional music and crafts to visitors. During the next several years, the Marrowbone Folk School served as one of the centers for developing the Appalachian Movement.¹⁴³

With spaces where community members could discuss their concerns and where they could actively participate in making changes in their communities, new issues began to rise to the surface in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially strip-mining and welfare rights.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, the national conversation around poverty began to shift with the advent of the Poor People’s Campaign. Activists in Appalachia increasingly came into conversation with other social justice movements and to identify their own activism as a strand in the movement of

¹⁴³ Marrowbone Folk School Pamphlet; “The Marrowbone News.”

¹⁴⁴ “AV Activity Reports: Project guideline report, 1965-1966,” Box 8, Folder 2, AV Records.

movements. But those conversations could not have happened without alliances on the ground, the development of community spaces, and the local networks that women fostered.

Political Rupture

As antipoverty programs experienced small successes in eastern Kentucky communities, conservative politicians looked to stem the tide of the War on Poverty. From the outset politicians across the South had been hostile toward poverty programs that circumvented state and local government agencies. Moreover, as grassroots poverty programs became more deeply rooted in Appalachian communities, activists scrutinized local political structures. State and local officials pushed back, seeking to purge the “outsiders” whom they blamed for radicalizing the poverty programs. Historians of Appalachia have written about these tensions in detail, usually focusing on the so-called radicals rather than how local activists experienced and interpreted the backlash against the War on Poverty, or how local politicians employed the language of “local versus outsiders,” discounting local activists’ role in the War on Poverty at the same time that they painted a picture of outsiders as radicals and communists engaged in conspiracies to overthrow the state.¹⁴⁵

Edith Easterling and Eula Hall were both affected by the politics of backlash. In 1969 Eula Hall was accepted into the volunteer program and received training in Atlanta, only to find out when she returned home that the director of the Kentucky division of the Economic Opportunity Office refused to approve VISTA placements in Floyd County that year. A state newspaper charged that VISTAs had “lost favor in the county seats, mostly because of their

¹⁴⁵ Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer*; Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals*, Eller, *Uneven Ground*.

liberal viewpoints, long hair and strange attire.”¹⁴⁶

Starting with the 1967 passage of the Green Amendment, the idea of maximum feasible participation of the poor in Community Action Programs was deemphasized as the amendment required more representation of local officials on boards. It also gave local officials the ability to control which community action agencies received federal money and resources, which in Kentucky led to defunding of the AVs and ouster of VISTAs in some counties. War on Poverty activists began to see a decline in federal resources as politics shifted to the right and local activists lost funding that had been provided through community action agencies. Sometimes funding and resources were simply denied, but other times local officials made dramatic attempts to discredit activists and to stir up fears of a subversive communist plot. The boldest display of local officials’ disdain for campaigns involving poor people and their outsider allies came in the spring of 1967, soon after antipoverty workers and local people began to organize against strip-mining in Pike County. Edith Easterling watched as local officials targeted young activists and sought to undermine the goals of the community organizations that she had been instrumental in running, especially the Marrowbone Folk School.

Strip-mining was by no means a new problem. The practice of stripping top soil to get to coal seams underneath had become a cheap and easy way for industry to secure coal in the 1960s, and the Kentucky legislature had done little to regulate the practice. Strip-mining was possible on private lands only because farmers at the turn-of-the-century had sold mineral rights to industry under broad-form-deeds. With new technologies at mid-century, coal companies were able to reach the low-lying coal seams, and landowners dealt with a shocking reality that the law did little to protect them or their land from strip- and auger-mining. Strip-miners wreaked havoc

¹⁴⁶ “Mountain Poor Vow to Fight for Vistas,” *Courier-Journal*, October 12, 1970.

on the landscape, uprooting trees and disturbing stones that slid down hillsides into creeks and onto farmland, the mine waste often polluting water ways and causing floods. Elderly farmers led the first protests against strip-mining starting in 1965, when “Uncle” Dan Gibson, wielding a squirrel rifle, guarded his stepson’s property (his stepson was serving in Vietnam) against strip-miners. He was arrested and put in jail, leading to a protest that drew over 100 people and to the formation of the Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People (AGSLP). Not long after Gibson’s arrest, Ollie “Widow” Combs, a neighbor of Gibson, sat in front of a strip-miner’s bulldozer and refused to move until she was arrested and carried away by police. The actions of Gibson and Combs and the formation of the Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People led to slightly more regulations of strip-mining, but the practice continued. As the coal industry set up strip-mine operations, people across the region organized their own chapters of AGSLP.¹⁴⁷

In the spring of 1967, Pike County resident and farmer Jink Ray denied strip-miners access to his land, and he found backing in antipoverty workers Joe and Karen Mulloy. Joe Mulloy, a young man from Louisville, Kentucky, was one of the first antipoverty workers whom Edith Easterling met. She remembered that, while some of the other antipoverty workers were interested in socializing and “chasing girls,” Mulloy took his job seriously and made attempts to get to know older people in the community. She trusted and often relied on him. “He was like my kid,” she recalled.¹⁴⁸

Mulloy started attending meetings of the AGSLP, and he invited Easterling to go with him. Easterling described people’s frustrations over strip-mining. “It was one of those things that you didn’t like, but you didn’t know what to do about it. Like if your pants was tore, and you

¹⁴⁷ Chad Montrie, *To Save the Land and People: A History of Opposition to Surface Coal Mining in Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 85-96.

¹⁴⁸ Easterling, interview by Kinderman.

didn't know how to sew them, you wouldn't like them tore, but you didn't know what to do about it. You just didn't know what to do."¹⁴⁹ When Mulloy and Easterling learned of a conference in Owensboro, Kentucky, where representatives from the Kentucky Coal Association, the Department of Reclamation, and the Department of Natural Resources were meeting, they and other activists decided to insert themselves into the conference where they could make a case for outlawing strip-mining. They organized a group of more than 200 people to attend the meeting and to counter the coal operators, who were, Easterling summed up with a touch of sarcasm, "showing the governor what a good program strip-mining was."¹⁵⁰

When the activists arrived, they began distributing pamphlets with information about strip-mining, which explained that, while strip-miners promised jobs, they were in fact ruining the land and the economy. Organizers of the conference deemed the activists disruptive and asked them to wait on the lawn, where the governor would eventually speak to them. The protestors went outside, singing protest ballads and civil rights hymns. "We was singing so big," Easterling remembered, that people in Owensboro began to stop and listen to them. When Governor Edward T. Breathitt finally came out, he promised that he would investigate strip-mining and keep strip-miners off of Jink Ray's property. Days later he revoked Puritan Coal Company's permit to mine on that property.¹⁵¹

Just over a week after this seeming victory, local officials in Pike County, including commonwealth attorney and one of a handful of Pike County millionaires, Thomas Ratliff, made

¹⁴⁹ Easterling, interview by Kinderman.

¹⁵⁰ "Press Release, July 13, 1967" and "Press Release, Monday, July 24," Box 40, Folder 12, Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People, 1967-1968," AV Records; Easterling, interview by Kinderman; Easterling, interview by Anne Lewis, "Outtakes—Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People," Appalshop Archive, Whitesburg, Kentucky.

¹⁵¹ "Owensboro Symposium on Stripmining," 1967, Box 55, Folder 2, AV Records; "Press Release, July 24, 1967," Box 40, Folder 12.

plans to root out radicals and quell the grassroots movement in eastern Kentucky. As reported in an AV memo, Ratliff met with the county sheriff, coal operators, the president of the Chamber of Commerce, and the director of the Big Sandy Community Action Agency Harry Eastburn (who had long questioned the need for the AVs) and considered the best way to shut down the Appalachian Volunteers. Their focus was on Pike County, but Eastburn and others soon targeted the AVs throughout eastern Kentucky. Only hours after the meeting, the sheriff arrested Joe Mulloy and Alan and Margaret McSurely, organizers for the Southern Conference Education Fund who were briefly associated with the volunteer programs.¹⁵²

The McSurelys relationship to Carl and Anne Braden provided ready fodder for Ratliff and his associates. Carl Braden, who directed the Southern Conference Education Fund with Anne in Louisville, had been charged with sedition in the 1950s after the couple helped to purchase a house for an African-American man in an all-white neighborhood. It took more imagination to infer that Mulloy was a Communist. Robert Holcomb, president of the Pike County Chamber of Commerce and the National Independent Coal Operators Association, declared that Mulloy—who was clean-shaven—had a beard “patterned after Raul Castro” as well as a poster of Castro displayed in his home. Edith Easterling recalled indignantly the charges made against the organizers: “The police took everything and anything from the McSurely’s [house] so they could fill up the pick-up truck and say they had a truck load of Communist stuff.” Thomas Ratliff, whom Edith had once supported in his bid for political office, sent a deputy to her home and requested that she meet with him to discuss the charges. She agreed to go, but she refused to ride in the police car. Once there Ratliff described the Communist books and posters that the police had confiscated. When Edith challenged Ratliff, who insisted that the

¹⁵² “Quarterly Report, October 1967, Special Report to Governor Breathitt,” Box 8, Folder 9, AV Activity Reports: Special Report to Governor Breathitt, 1967, AV Records.

organizers were planning a Communist-inspired insurrection, he rebutted that Edith had been brainwashed by them. He also took the opportunity to call her a “nigger-lover” and to question her pro-union politics.¹⁵³

News quickly spread through Pike County that a Communist plot had been uncovered and that Edith Easterling was affiliated with the subversives. Over the next weeks and months, even as the Kentucky courts deemed the state’s sedition law unconstitutional and charges against the organizers were dropped, rumors continued to circulate about Edith Easterling’s political alignments. The sedition controversy fractured the political coalitions that had developed in the mountains, called federal resources into question, and unraveled community ties.

Edith Easterling faced the consequences of rumor and gossip that she was a Communist-sympathizer on a very personal level. She and her husband were harassed by people shining lights in their home and shooting out windows. They belonged to the Old Regular Baptist church but soon stopped attending because of the gossip circulating among members of the congregation. Some people told Edith to her face that she had changed for the worse. When she visited Joe Mulloy and the McSurelys in jail, the jailer told her that it was sad to see a woman from one of the finest families of Pike County become one of the sorriest.¹⁵⁴

A day after Joe Mulloy’s arrest, the Louisville draft board revoked his 2-A deferment and requested that he report to his draft board. Mulloy decided to resist the draft. On the heels of the sedition charges and negative attention in the media, the AV director Milton Ogle planned a staff vote on whether to retain Mulloy on the staff or to fire him. Edith Easterling made one of her most difficult decisions as an antipoverty worker and voted to fire Mulloy. In a memo to the AVs

¹⁵³ Easterling, interview by Kinderman; Easterling, interview by Lewis.

¹⁵⁴ Easterling, interview by Kinderman.

she explained her decision: “I feel like we the people need the help that we get from the AVs and we could not work in Pike County if Joe stayed on here.” She continued that Mulloy had contributed greatly to the programs in Pike County, but the work would “all go down if Joe stays.” Easterling reported that the day news came out that Mulloy was resisting the draft, someone shot a bullet through a window at the Marrowbone Folk School. She feared that, if Mulloy stayed, he would draw more negative attention to the school and people’s lives might be at risk. Easterling concluded her letter: “My feelings for Joe is as great as the feelings I have for my daughter, Sue, and I know Sue would take the same stand that Joe took but I would also vote against Sue if she took the stand and held [sic] the position Joe does. I admire Joe for his bravery and it does take bravery to do a thing he has done he was brave in my book when helped stop the bulldozer on the Jink Ray Farm. But this is a different kind of bravery I guess [sic].”¹⁵⁵

Easterling realized that Mulloy’s position on the Vietnam War and his draft resistance could be more divisive in Pike County than his position on strip mining. Working-class people who knew that strip-mining could hurt their livelihoods and destroy their homes allied with outsiders, often more liberal activists. But those relationships were always tenuous, and the politics of the Vietnam War strained them more than other issues. Regardless of Easterling’s own stance on the war, she knew that young men in eastern Kentucky, with fewer education and work opportunities than middle-class men, had little chance of receiving draft deferments. Moreover, many men in Kentucky prided themselves on their patriotism and saw the military as

¹⁵⁵ Edith Easterling, “Why I voted for Joe Mulloy to be Fired,” December 6, 1967, Box 11, Folder 1, AV Records. The firing of Mulloy led to a series of resignations. See letters by Thomas Bethel, Steve Daugherty, and Mike Clark, and the press release “Appalachian Volunteers Fire Joe Mulloy,” Box 11, Folder 1, AV Records. See also Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 149-151; Kiffmeyer, 194-195. Kiffmeyer points to Easterling’s statement as evidence that there was a deep divide between locals and outsiders in the Appalachian Volunteers. While a division over the war dogged the organization, Easterling’s feelings about Joe, the war, and the AVs are more complicated and nuanced, as she cites her closeness to Joe Mulloy and compares his politics to her daughter’s (pointing to generational differences). This is less a story about insiders and outsiders than it is the story of the consequences of political attacks and how they drove wedges into antipoverty organizations.

a valid route to gainful and honorable employment. Prior to Mulloy's draft resistance, many of the male employees of the Appalachian Volunteers had requested and received occupational deferment or conscientious objector status.¹⁵⁶ Those deferments were not always well-received in eastern Kentucky communities. One local Appalachian Volunteer recalled that older men in her community considered the outsider men, despite their legal deferments, "draft dodgers."¹⁵⁷ Easterling believed that Mulloy's decision to resist the draft would have dire consequences on the already shaky position of the Marrowbone Folk School and antipoverty programs associated with it. So she made the heartrending decision to cut ties with him.

Her decision did not end conflict over the antipoverty programs in Pike County and eastern Kentucky, however. In fact, in some ways things were just heating up. About a year after the arrest of Mulloy and the McSurelys, the General Assembly approved the ten-member Kentucky Un-American Activities Committee (KUAC). Governor Louie B. Nunn appointed Kentucky legislators to the committee, which was authorized to investigate groups whose goal was "the overthrow of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, or of the United States by force, violence or other unlawful means." Before beginning their own investigations, the state legislators visited the House Un-American Activities Committee in Washington, D.C. KUAC's first hearings investigated civil rights activities in Louisville, Kentucky, where the Southern Conference Educational Fund was located. In October, the committee sent investigators to Pike County to study antipoverty programs. The primary investigator, Paul Durbin, a former army colonel and unsuccessful candidate for the state house, made a series of claims that supposedly

¹⁵⁶ The records include a couple of dozen letters from the AVs director to the Selective Service requesting deferment for antipoverty workers. Letters between 1965-1969, Box 59, Folder 1, AV Records.

¹⁵⁷ Thelma Parker Witt, interview by Jo Crockett Zingg, November 11, 2010, 939-012, Southern Appalachian Archives, Berea College.

added up to a communist threat in eastern Kentucky. At the October hearings, he pointed back to the sedition case as evidence that the AVs were a threat to American society (despite the fact that the anti-sedition law had been overturned); he explained that a petition by a poor people's group to ensure low rates for water was an attempt by the AVs to control the organization; and he argued that the AVs were un-American in dress and behavior and were associated with Communist organizations.¹⁵⁸

In December KUAC returned to Pikeville for another round of hearings, but before the hearings had ended, the committee recommended that the state discontinue funding of the Appalachian Volunteers.¹⁵⁹ While the hearings were supposedly based on a conflict involving how much people in Marrowbone Creek would be required to pay for a water system and whether or not they would receive a federal grant for construction costs, they were actually an attempt to further discount the volunteers in the aftermath of the sedition case.

Edith Easterling was called before the committee, along with an Old Regular Baptist minister who had worked with her at the Marrowbone Folk School. The morning of December 3, Edith readied herself for the hearing and decided to wear her new red dress. Easterling laughs that she "never thought about the Communists wearing the red," a detail that was not lost on some local reporters. She knew that investigators had been asking others about her political activities and beliefs, and she had sat and watched as investigators scouted the Marrowbone Folk School for evidence that she and the school were involved in an un-American plot. The past few months had been rough on Edith and her family, with rumors swirling and threats on their safety.

¹⁵⁸ Kentucky Un-American Activities File, November 5, 1968, Box 50, Folder 8, AV Records. See also "The Sedition Case: Background to KUAC's Hearing," Series 3, Folder 309, Alan McSurely Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

¹⁵⁹ "KUAC Delivers Mid-Trial Verdict," *Mountain Life and Work*, December 1968.

Rather than blame her community for falling for rumors, Edith saw the “courthouse gang” as the problem. People in power were stirring up people’s fears, and she was ready to take them on. At the hearing, Easterling “reproached the committee for failing to give a fair hearing to antipoverty workers and the Appalachian Volunteers.” She lambasted the members for investigating the Appalachian Volunteers, stating that they should “go out in the hollows and see the people who have to go to bed hungry.” She then criticized eastern Kentucky politicians, who, she said, only recognized poor people on election day when they found ways to buy their votes.¹⁶⁰ On the next day, she testified that she had been a victim of harassment, only to have one of the committee members question the seriousness of the threats.¹⁶¹

Ultimately, the hearings did not expose a plot to overthrow the state but did lead to the further fragmentation of the anti-poverty programs in eastern Kentucky. Reflecting on this episode years later, Easterling observed that the collective power of poor people threatened many local politicians. The series of events in 1967 and 1968 in Pikeville, from the sedition arrests to harassment of poverty workers to the KUAC hearings, revealed the lengths that local officials and industry people would go to oust community organizers and quell protests by poor people in eastern Kentucky.¹⁶²

These events also took a toll on the Appalachian Volunteers. Everything began to unravel at once. Even though the KUAC hearings led to no criminal charges, the organization’s reputation was severely undermined and Governor Louie B. Nunn, who had run on a campaign promise to oust social change organizations from the state, refused to approve the OEO’s

¹⁶⁰ “Witness Scolds Probers for Attacks on AVs,” *Courier-Journal*, December 4, 1968.

¹⁶¹ “Witness Scolds Probers for Attacks on AVs” and “KUAC Delivers Mid-Trial Verdict”; Easterling, interview by Hawkins.

¹⁶² Easterling, interview by Kinderman.

funding so that the AVs could continue for another year. He rejected the OEO funds on the basis that the AVs had failed to spell out their objectives in their application.¹⁶³ The succession of blows to community groups created suspicions and led to in-fighting and distrust. The Pike County Community Association (PCCA), formerly associated with the Marrowbone Folk School, severed ties with the school and Easterling. Some felt betrayed by Easterling's decision to testify in front of KUAC rather than wait for the committee to subpoena her. Others believed that she no longer worked in the interest of poor people. As PCCA members, Edith Easterling and her allies struggled over who should head the Marrowbone Folk School, the AVs were losing financial support, and in October the AV director David Walls laid off Easterling.¹⁶⁴

The KUAC hearings, internal struggles for power, and the loss of Easterling's paid position stirred resentments between outsider and local people, even pushing Easterling to reconsider outsiders' role in Appalachia. An activist from California, Thomas Ramsay continued to be employed by the Appalachian Volunteers and served as fieldman in Pike County. To Easterling, the AVs had chosen to keep an outsider instead of her in a staff position, which she believed was a sign that the AVs had become dismissive of local people's opinions and ability to lead. She organized a letter writing campaign in support of her position in the AVs. The letters ranged from mothers who testified on behalf of Easterling's character to people from around the country who had visited the Marrowbone Folk School and thought highly of Easterling's community programs. While to Easterling the AV directors had "fired everyone who really wants to help the poor people of Pike County," the organization was actually soon to run

¹⁶³ "KUAC Delivers Midtrial Verdict"; Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals*, 204-205.

¹⁶⁴ Memo from Pike County Citizens' Association, Box 55, Folder 9, AV Records; Packet of letters in support of Edith Easterling, October 1968, Box 46, Folder 5, AV Records.

out of funding.¹⁶⁵ By the following summer, the organization could no longer fund projects, and it closed its doors for good in early 1970.¹⁶⁶

By 1968 the Vietnam War had expanded and political tensions had significantly weakened War on Poverty programs. Nonetheless, many of the networks established during the War on Poverty would not be undone. Women in particular continued to build a movement for poor people in Appalachia, some with small pots of money left from the War on Poverty, others with resources from regional organizations, and all with the main ingredient of ambition and determination.

In 1965, poor and working-class women in Appalachia faced a War on Poverty rife with barriers based on sex and social status. Nevertheless, antipoverty programs offered them invaluable resources, in funding, education, and support by antipoverty workers who brought with them a range of skills. The War on Poverty opened opportunities to local people—especially women—to lead communities in discussions about how to tackle problems associated with poverty. During the height of the War on Poverty, residents of Appalachian communities joined with a cadre of young activists to design local antipoverty programs and to create new, more democratic community spaces. Those spaces provided the opportunity to develop grassroots analyses of how the economic and political systems in the mountains kept poor people struggling for subsistence. While a political backlash diminished some of the most promising antipoverty programs, women and their allies did not give up hope. By the late 1960s, as national conversations around black civil rights began to shift to economic justice and welfare rights,

¹⁶⁵ “Statement by Edith Easterling, Marrowbone Folk School, February 25, 1969,” Box 95, Folder 9, Highlander Research and Education Center Papers, The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Archival Division (hereafter Highlander Records).

¹⁶⁶ Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals*, 204-205.

women found more openings to discuss their experiences as poor, white women in a region where automation was rapidly stealing men's jobs and leading to a crisis in the family-wage. They pushed for a more inclusive and stronger safety net; they continued to join alliances that implicitly and explicitly addressed the needs of working-class and poor women; and they challenged local politicians bent on dismantling antipoverty programs for good. All the while, their increasing presence in public campaigns, meetings, and hearings, gave legitimacy to working-class, rural women's participation in politics.

CHAPTER THREE

Movements for Poor People's Rights

Over a weekend in November 1971, a group of about 300 people from Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia traveled to Washington, D.C. for a gathering they called “Appalachian March for Survival Against Unfulfilled Promises.” Organized by welfare rights groups and supported by the Council of the Southern Mountains and the Highlander Center, the march was a chance for regular Appalachian people, white and black, women and men, to make claims to their rights as citizens of the United States. The participants brought a range of issues to the table that they saw as interconnected: public assistance for poor and single mothers; guaranteed incomes for poor families; benefits for disabled miners, their wives and widows; and comprehensive health services for poor people. At the heart of the march was the argument that welfare, broadly understood, was a right: the United States government had a duty to ensure that citizens had a “right to live.”¹⁶⁷

A week later a small group of people who had gone on the trip came together to reflect on the meaning of the march, what they had learned, and what they saw as next steps. Shelva Thompson, a welfare rights activist from West Virginia, commented that she was proud of her compatriots, who showed politicians that they weren’t “talking to a bunch of old, stupid, poor people.” Eula Hall noted that it was obvious that many of the politicians did not understand welfare policies or how they affected recipients. A man from the Highlander Center who had helped to organize the march said that it signified an important moment of coalition-building, as

¹⁶⁷ For coverage of the march, see *Mountain Life and Work*, May-June 1971 and September-October 1971.

welfare rights activists came together with advocates for disabled miners, especially those who suffered from black lung disease. “It’s people power,” he asserted. Edith Easterling, who was unable to attend the march but who kept up with it every step of the way, argued that Appalachians needed to organize and make demands as a group. She also noted that the march “opened people’s eyes to how politics work; you get more educated when you can get outside the community and learn new things.” Before the meeting ended, Eula Hall declared, “I think we ought to send a woman to be president.” Someone else chimed in, “What about a hillbilly?” Laughing, they all agreed that Washington politics could use a good shake up.¹⁶⁸

The March for Survival was the culmination of a series of events between 1968 and 1971 that focused on welfare rights activism. Like welfare rights activism generally, welfare organizing in Appalachia was sustained by women, from the testimonies they gave at public hearings and the contacts that they made with the National Welfare Rights Organization to their efforts to reform social services at the local level. All the while, they worked to make policies more responsive to the needs of low-income women, who managed household budgets and fed children. Coal field wives and mothers sought to maintain and strengthen the social safety net and to protect their homes and families from the worst abuses of the coal industry. At the same time, they spoke to more abstract issues: mainly, the rights of poor people to engage the political process and to hold local and state officials responsible for implementing fair and effective policies. Claiming both political and welfare rights, poor people in Appalachia assessed a political economy that left them with little power.

This chapter traces the organic development of a welfare rights movement in Appalachia that intersected with national and regional conversations about poverty and welfare but also reflected the unique experiences of the people involved. It opens with the Council of the

¹⁶⁸ “March for Survival, Washington Impressions,” November 21, 1971. CD, SM-CT-005-001, CSM Records II.

Southern Mountain's changing stance on poverty and its support of the Poor People's Campaign before turning to the widely publicized War on Poverty hearings, led by Robert F. Kennedy, in eastern Kentucky. It then traces the rise of a state-wide coalition of welfare rights organizations, which emerged out of the antipoverty debates of the 1960s. Between 1967 and 1971, single mothers, widows, the elderly, and disabled men inserted their ideas and visions about fairness and equality into the debates about poverty. They did so at public hearings and at welfare rights marches and in their own communities, where they sought to make the welfare system more humane. In the process, they forged cross-sex and cross-race alliances that showed how diverse groups could unify around a concept of welfare that was inclusive and rights-based rather than one that subordinated recipients based on gender, race, and class.¹⁶⁹

Shifting Views of Poverty

During the War on Poverty the Council of the Southern Mountains served as a clearing house for debates about poverty and reform. Council members celebrated what they called "mountain culture" even as they worried that poor "mountaineers" suffered from a "culture of poverty." Drawing on the post-World War II behavioral science view that poverty was the by-product of fatalistic, hopeless, and marginalized enclaves of people left behind in the post-war boom, Council officials sought to provide educational and vocational programs that would uplift the poor. For guidance they relied on the application of the culture-of-poverty theory to mountain culture as outlined by Jack E. Weller, a minister and missionary who was based in West Virginia

¹⁶⁹ Organizing under welfare rights has gone largely unanalyzed in the historiography of the War on Poverty in Appalachia. The major treatments of the War on Poverty mention welfare rights as an aside, not as a robust, organic movement that involved hundreds of people. For one of the rare studies of welfare rights organizing in the region, published in 1975 when organizing was still under way, see Richard A. Couto, *Poverty, Politics, and Health Care: An Appalachian Experience*.

in the 1950s and 1960s. As historian Ronald Eller explains, Weller's book "linked the academic ideas of the culture of poverty with popular images of Appalachian otherness to provide an intellectual framework for regional uplift programs."¹⁷⁰

Even though the culture-of-poverty theory was overly simplistic and narrow in its portrayal of poverty and class in America, it did provide an opening for a national dialogue about economic inequality. Critical assessments and portrayals of poverty, from Michael Harrington's *The Other America* to Harry Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, both of which to an extent borrowed from the theory, were widely read and shone a light on poverty amidst affluence. While some opponents of the War on Poverty used culture-of poverty arguments to bolster their negative opinions of poor people and to argue against strengthening the social safety net, poverty warriors more often drew on them to make a case for reviving social services and educational and vocational programs. Moreover, the notion of maximum feasible participation, one of the guiding principles of the poverty programs, paved the way for the participation of poor people in poverty debates, and their participation would ultimately challenge the concept of welfare dependency that lay at the heart of culture-of-poverty theory.¹⁷¹

Reporting on the progress of the Appalachian Volunteers and the role of youth in the antipoverty programs, psychiatrists Robert Coles and Joseph Brenner captured the tension inherent in many War on Poverty programs. On the one hand, scores of studies had deemed poor people apathetic and passive, personality traits that led to a cycle of poverty. With their emphasis on education and job training, early antipoverty programs were supposed to disrupt the cycle.

¹⁷⁰ "Biography/History," Jack E. Weller Papers, KYSX263-A, 1965, Special Collections, Berea College; Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 102; Weller, *Yesterday's People*.

¹⁷¹ For more on the linguistic and historical roots of the idea of welfare dependency, see Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of 'Dependency': Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State," in Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (New York: Verso, 2013); Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

Yet, as outsider volunteers worked in poor communities, they found culture-of-poverty explanations less and less compelling. Coles and Brenner argued that the volunteers' collaborations with Appalachian people "refuted volumes and volumes of research, and in a sense confronted the nation as well as their own region with the true moral dilemma and social condition of the region." The "moral dilemma" was not the individual failings of Appalachian people, but the conditions in which people lived. As volunteers lived and worked in the region, they witnessed and experienced the consequences of economic disparity: bad roads, poor sanitation, few resources to combat strip mining, and barriers to legal and medical resources.¹⁷²

The Council of the Southern Mountains also began to shift its approach to poverty, most notably at its 1967 annual conference. There, structural critiques of poverty eclipsed the culture-of-poverty models espoused by an older generation of social scientists and missionaries. Speakers infused the meeting with the spirit of the civil rights movement, which had turned to economic justice as a key organizing strategy, paving the way for the Council's support for the Poor People's Campaign.¹⁷³

Several of the invited speakers at the conference called for radical evaluations of the U.S. economic system. Vivian Henderson, an African American economist from Appalachia and president of a historically black college, gave a keynote speech on the Freedom Budget, which Bayard Rustin introduced a year earlier at a conference organized by the A. Philip Randolph Institute. Henderson was among the authors of *The "Freedom Budget" for All Americans*, which called for "basic, far-reaching institutional changes in the nation's social and economic

¹⁷² Robert Coles, "An Evaluation of the Appalachian Volunteers," and "Further Follow-Up Evaluation of Appalachian Volunteers," n.d. Box 12, Folder 9, AV Records.

¹⁷³ For further analysis of how the Council of the Southern Mountains transformed in the twentieth century, see Thomas Kiffmeyer, "Looking Back to the City in the Hills: The Council of the Southern Mountains and a Longer View of the War on Poverty in the Appalachian South, 1913-1970."

structures” and a ten-year program to liquidate poverty. Rustin had assembled a team of civil rights leaders, including Henderson, as well as a broad coalition of labor leaders, policy makers, and intellectuals to devise the program. The summaries of the proposal pointed to key reforms: increased employment opportunities; a guaranteed income for all Americans; adequate minimum wages for workers; an end to the misuse and contamination of natural resources; and decent homes, medical care, and education for all. The proposal was introduced to the Johnson administration, but it never gained traction. Even so, some of the proposed ideas, especially a guaranteed income and medical care for all Americans, resonated throughout the 1970s and were picked up by antipoverty and welfare rights activists.¹⁷⁴

While none of the other speakers in 1967 offered a proposal as far-reaching as the Freedom Budget, they did endorse policies that would have fundamentally reshaped economic and social relations in Appalachia. Social critic Paul Goodman argued that full employment was unachievable in a capitalist economy and also called for a guaranteed income for Americans. Myles Horton, who drew on the model of citizenship schools for disenfranchised African Americans, advocated free people’s colleges in Appalachia, where mountain people could acquire the skills and knowledge to gain power in regional politics and alter social relations. And Gordon Ebersole of the Congress of Appalachian Development called for the coal industry to voluntarily change from private to non-profit status and to shift from a profit motive to one of social obligation.¹⁷⁵ All of these speakers brought to the fore the major challenges facing policy makers and activists: how to protect Americans from the ill-effects of capitalism. For many, the

¹⁷⁴ “Fifty-Fifth Annual Conference, 1967,” Box 145, Folder 4, Council of the Southern Mountains, 1913-1970, Southern Appalachian Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College (hereafter cited as CSM Records I); Paul Le Blanc, “Freedom Budget: The Promise of the Civil Rights Movement for Economic Justice,” *Working USA: Journal of Labor and Society* vol. 6, no. 1 (March 2013): 52.

¹⁷⁵ “Fifty-Fifth Annual Conference, 1967.”

War on Poverty provided only first steps toward a fundamental restructuring of American social and economic structures.

When the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) organized the Poor People's Campaign, organizers invited the Council to participate. The invitation reflected the SCLC's desire to spark a movement of "waves of the nation's poor and disinherited," of all races, from major cities and rural areas. Their demands—jobs and income for all Americans—and their larger goal—to challenge an economically-driven power structure in which poor people did not have the means to participate—found supporters across Appalachia.¹⁷⁶ The Council declared support for the Poor People's Campaign and the SCLC's vision of a broad-based coalition of poor people in the spring of 1968, just after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The Council's president Philip Young explained the decision, stating that the campaign could bring "radically new and critically needed expressions of social justice in our land" and that the Council had a duty "to help spread that information and to help develop that will."¹⁷⁷

On May 25, 1968, organizers of the Poor People's Campaign and their allies held a gathering called the Appalachian People's Meeting. Five hundred poor people and activists from across Appalachia traveled to the meeting in Charleston, West Virginia. There, SCLC representative Andrew Young gave a rousing speech on the need for a multi-racial antipoverty movement.¹⁷⁸ He argued that the government's inadequate support for quality education for all Americans implied that some schools functioned to keep people in ignorance, not provide them the skills to achieve a better life. Ignorant people, he stated, could be controlled by local

¹⁷⁶ "Statement of Purpose: Poor People's Campaign, Washington, D.C.," Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Box 59, Folder 6, AV Records.

¹⁷⁷ "Resolution Adopted," *Mountain Life and Work*, May 1968.

¹⁷⁸ "Appalachian People's Meeting, 1966-1968," Box 40, Folder 15, AV Records.

governments. At the end of the speech he was joined on stage by a white Appalachian man who admitted to having been racist in the past, but had come to believe that “we’ve all got to stay together.” He then declared that he loved Young like a brother.¹⁷⁹

Four days after the meeting a group of 190 Appalachians traveled to meet activists at Resurrection City in Washington, D.C., the site of the Poor People’s Campaign, where they built an “Appalachian hollow.” A month later a larger delegation traveled to D.C. The trip reports recite all the standard complaints about the Poor People’s Campaign: it rained too much and the mud was too thick, and as the weather worsened, some events were cancelled. Nonetheless, the reports also point to the hard work the delegates did and the excitement that punctuated the gathering. They shared meals and talked with groups from around the country, from migrant farm workers from the West Coast and Mexican Americans led by Chicano activist Reies López Tijerina to Native American groups and NAACP representatives. For those who participated, the campaign was a powerful moment of unity across race and region. One press release from an Appalachian group announced their purpose in attending: “to let our Congressmen and Senators, our President, our people and the people of the world know that the poor people of Appalachia, white and black, are standing together with the poor people of the Mississippi delta, the poor people of the Indian reservations, the Mexican-Americans, the Puerto Ricans, the grape pickers of California, the potato harvesters of Maine—we all stand together.”¹⁸⁰

On their first full day at Resurrection City, Chicano activists joined a group of Appalachians for a protest at the home of West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd, who had been a vocal critic of the Poor People’s Campaign. For both the Chicano and Appalachian activists,

¹⁷⁹ “Mountain People Attend Poor People’s Conference,” *The Hawk Eye*, May 20, 1968, Box 130, Folder 1, AV Records.

¹⁸⁰ Press Release, “More than 700 people came to the Appalachian People’s Meeting...” May 25, 1968, Box 40, Folder 15, AV Records.

rights to land in part motivated their activism; for Chicanos, land lost during the U.S-Mexican War, and for Appalachians, land lost to coal operators and strip-mining. Two hundred people piled into buses and rode to Byrd's home, where they gathered in front to sing, picket, and pray (in English and Spanish). After about an hour a representative knocked on the door, and when Mrs. Byrd and a security guard answered, the group unfurled a banner that stated "POOR PEOPLE ARE NOT FREE PEOPLE—GIVE US BACK OUR LAND RIGHTS" and included about one thousand signatures. Mrs. Byrd told the protesters that her husband was at his office and they could find him there, to which the group responded, "Let him come to us."¹⁸¹

The Poor People's Campaign offered Appalachians a chance to participate in a broad-based movement and to make political demands on a national stage. Bringing a different kind of visibility to Appalachia, mountain people showed that the region was not solely a place of destitution and poverty; it was also a site of tenacious activism. Moreover, the Poor People's Campaign infused the regional movement with energy. While the campaign in Washington ended without achieving immediate policy changes, activists carried the lessons learned back to their homes and into their antipoverty organizations. More than ever before, they insisted that poor people were integral to the policy-making organizations that made decisions about and implemented antipoverty programs.¹⁸²

Welfare rights organizing was one key area of organizing. With the help of the Poor

¹⁸¹ Eric Metzner, "Partial Report on the Trip to Washington," June 3, 1968, Box 40, Folder 15, AV Records.

¹⁸² Gordon Mantler argues that the Poor People's Campaign "offered not a break or a new beginning for American Indians, poor whites, or Puerto Ricans, but an important bridge to the more hard-nosed activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s "Black, Brown, and Poor: Martin Luther King, Jr., the Poor People's Campaign, and Its Legacies," PhD Dissertation, Duke University (2008), 234. In his book based on that dissertation, Mantler focuses more on identity politics and the multiracial coalitions that formed during and after the Poor People's Campaign and less on the role of poor whites, but he nonetheless shows how African Americans, Chicanos, and poor whites from Appalachia found common ground during the campaign. See Mantler, *Power to the Poor: Black-Brown Coalition and the Fight for Economic Justice, 1960-1974*.

People's Campaign, the welfare rights movement gained traction across the country. While the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) had organized formally in 1966, the Poor People's Campaign provided a platform for welfare rights activists. During and after the campaign, the NWRO spread the message of welfare rights to a broader audience than it had known before. In the late 1960s, welfare rights campaigns surged in Appalachia.¹⁸³

Food, Jobs, and Education: Defining Welfare

Several months before the Poor People's Campaign, activists and welfare recipients had provided a glaring portrait of hunger and poverty in eastern Kentucky during the 1968 public hearings on the War on Poverty led by soon-to-be presidential candidate Senator Robert F. Kennedy and Congressman Carl Perkins. Kennedy toured eastern Kentucky in part to evaluate the success of the War on Poverty programs and to document hunger in America for the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty.¹⁸⁴ The field hearings offered local activists and people in need of better federal food programs the chance to share their everyday experiences. The testimonies revealed that food issues were linked to other interconnected problems: insufficient funds for school lunch programs, the lack of jobs in the region, gaps in the food stamp and food commodity programs, and a lack of support for female caregivers.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Little to date has been written about welfare rights organizing, or more generally, welfare rights in poor white communities. The historiography, on which I build, has focused on the National Welfare Rights Organization and local organizing of black women in urban areas. See Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*; Valk, *Radical Sisters*; Chappell, *The War on Welfare*; West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement*; Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*; and Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace*.

¹⁸⁴ "Transcript of Evidence, Hearing Held at Vortex, Kentucky" and "Transcript of Evidence, Hearing Held at Fleming-Neon, Kentucky," Field Hearings—Eastern Kentucky, U.S.S. Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty, Archived in The Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project, http://www.rfkineky.org/docs/Vortex_transcript.pdf, accessed July 30, 2013.

¹⁸⁵ For a description of the tour, see Peter Edelman, *Searching for America's Heart: RFK and the Renewal of Hope* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 57-58.

When President Johnson signed the Food Stamp Act of 1964, he predicted that it would be “one of the most valuable weapons for the war on poverty.”¹⁸⁶ He argued that in a nation with food abundance no child should go hungry and that, with cooperation between state and federal governments, hunger was a problem that could be solved. Yet the effects of the Food Stamp Act were not immediate. Only after many independent reports, public hearings, and personal stories did the program begin to reach the most food insecure populations. Poor people’s groups were central to this process.

While the campaign on hunger and nutrition took on a particular shape in eastern Kentucky communities, it was part of a broader movement that had its roots in the civil rights movement. As historian Laurie Green has shown, in the 1960s civil rights activists pressed government officials to respond to the conditions that they had witnessed in the Deep South, where impoverished African American children exhibited the tell-tale signs of starvation, from distended bellies to stunted growth. In the spring of 1967, the U.S. Senate and a Field Foundation-supported committee of physicians reported shocking levels of malnutrition and hunger in the Mississippi Delta, galvanizing policy makers and activists and leading to “a flurry of investigations, hearings, and proposals by Congress, government agencies, and private nonprofits.”¹⁸⁷

The Citizens Crusade Against Poverty (CCAP), a non-partisan coalition of labor and civil rights leaders and poverty warriors that focused on community action and education, expanded investigations into poor communities across the nation and also worked in conjunction with

¹⁸⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks Upon Signing the Food Stamp Act,” August 31, 1964, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=26472>.

¹⁸⁷ Laurie B. Green, “Saving Babies in Memphis: The Politics of Race, Health, and Hunger during the War on Poverty,” in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History*, 137.

Kennedy and the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty.¹⁸⁸ In 1967, CCAP organized a Citizens' Board of Inquiry and held hearings in Hazard, Kentucky; San Antonio, Texas; and Birmingham, Alabama. The group also went on field trips, traveling across the country from Mississippi to the Navajo reservation of Arizona, from the slums of Boston to the backwoods of eastern Kentucky. The hearings allowed for reports by public officials and community leaders, as well as testimonies by dozens of people who faced hunger on a daily basis. On their field trips, the board members conducted interviews, visited medical facilities, and collected data on hunger and nutrition. CCAP staff submitted a policy paper to the White House in July 1967, "Facts About Food Programs," which showed that food programs were offered only sporadically throughout the nation's poorest counties. Yet, where food programs had been implemented, they undercut the worst effects of poverty. Thus, the CCAP called for the White House to take a stronger stance on alleviating hunger: "Where local counties, or states, are unable or unwilling to provide food to a broad section of the poor, alternative channels must be activated."¹⁸⁹

The CCAP's findings eventually became part of the published report *Hunger, U.S.A.*, a compilation of evidence showing that malnutrition plagued many poor communities and was directly related to impoverishment.¹⁹⁰ The committee reported a startling range of problems associated with hunger: stunted growth in children, high infant mortality rates, high incidences of anemia and protein deficiencies, brain damage related to malnutrition, and high incidences of

¹⁸⁸ See "Citizens Crusade Against Poverty Collection," finding aid, acc. # 516, Archives of Labor and Union Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, <http://www.reuther.wayne.edu/files/UR000516.pdf>, accessed September 23, 2013.

¹⁸⁹ "Facts About Food Programs," Citizens' Crusade Against Poverty, Folder CM/Food, 1/1/67-6/20/67, Box 4, WHCF, LBJ Library.

¹⁹⁰ Citizens' Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States, *Hunger, U.S.A: A Report* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

parasitic diseases. It also analyzed the various food and welfare programs, documenting limitations to providing adequate amounts of food as well as a history of “bureaucratic non-response,” especially in African-American communities in Mississippi.¹⁹¹ The findings flew in the face of assumptions about poor people’s illnesses, which often blamed them for their own condition, linking chronic health problems to supposed immoral behavior.¹⁹²

Hunger, U.S.A. caught the attention of activists, public officials, and investigative journalists, the latter of which helped to spread the news of hunger in America to an even broader audience.¹⁹³ In May 1968, CBS aired “Hunger in America,” a documentary based on a ten-month investigation of food insecurity in poor communities that drew attention to the limitations of the USDA food programs in combatting it. The searing portrait angered some Washington officials, who charged that the film exaggerated problems. But the reports kept coming. In October, journalists Charles and Bonnie Remsberg published “America’s Hungry Families” in *Good Housekeeping*, for which they won the Sidney Hillman Prize. The pair had spent time in five poor communities across the United States, and, as in the CBS documentary, they highlighted the stories of families struggling to make ends meet and feed their children. They opened their article by evoking the relationship between civil rights, economic justice, and hunger, “An estimated ten million persons in this, the world’s richest country, are hungry....One of the major objectives of the Poor People’s Campaign in establishing Resurrection City in

¹⁹¹ *Hunger, U.S.A.*

¹⁹² See Laurie Green, “Saving Babies in Memphis,” 141.

¹⁹³ See Robert Shebbill, “It Isn’t True that Nobody Starves in America,” *The New York Times Magazine*, June 4, 1967; Lois Heren, “Americans who are too poor to be helped,” *The Times*, June 20, 1967. See also reports by activist organizations: Committee on School Lunch Participation, *Their Daily Bread: A Study of the National School Lunch Program* (Atlanta: McNelley-Rudd Printing Service, Inc., 1968); Southern Regional Council, “Special Report: Hungry Children,” n.d., Box 4, Folder CM/Food, 1/1/67-6/20/67, WHCF, LBJ Library; Robert Coles, *Still Hungry in America* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1969).

Washington, D.C., last spring, was to awaken government officials and the general public to the existence of this widespread hunger in America. The general response to the cries of the starving poor has been bewilderment and disbelief.”¹⁹⁴

In one of their five portraits of hungry families, the Remsbergs described the conditions of the R. family, who lived in “a rickety old cabin,” twenty miles from Whitesburg, Kentucky. The story of John, Sally, and their three children captured the intertwined problems of poverty, hunger, and a lack of health care. Sally, who was pregnant at the time of the journalists’ visit, suffered from severe arthritis and stomach ulcers, problems compounded by malnourishment. John, who was unemployed, had applied for welfare assistance on the basis that Sally was disabled and he needed to care for her, but welfare officials denied his application. Although they suffered from worms and malnutrition, food stamp and school lunch programs kept the R. children from starving. Food stamps provided enough food for breakfast and supper, but the family depended on the children receiving free lunch at school. The principal at the children’s school had recently informed the family that, due to a tight budget, they might be cut from the program since they lived close enough to school that they could walk home for lunch. Yet food stamps did not provide enough credit for a month’s worth of food for a moneyless family like the R.’s. The authors concluded that the examples of the R. family and the others they visited across the country revealed that “our present programs for dealing with the problem of hunger in America fall far short of the needs.”¹⁹⁵

Reports and news coverage of hunger and malnourishment put pressure on politicians to address a glaring problem in affluent America. For instance, after “Hunger in America” aired,

¹⁹⁴ CBS Reports, “Hunger in America,” produced by Martin Carr, aired May 21, 1968 (CBS News, 1968); Charles and Bonnie Remsberg, “America’s Hungry Families,” *Good Housekeeping*, October 1968.

¹⁹⁵ Charles and Bonnie Remsberg, “America’s Hungry Families.”

the White House received dozens upon dozens of telegrams that ranged from laments to excoriations that the President had not done more to curb the worst effects of poverty. Most called for immediate action. One man wrote the simple message: “I HAVE JUST SEEN THE CBS PROGRAM ON HUNGER IN AMERICA IN THE NAME OF GOD FIND SOME WAY TO FEED HUNGRY PEOPLE NOW.” The White House turned to the head of the Department of Agriculture to come up with immediate fixes and to address the gaps in the food stamp program.¹⁹⁶

While news outlets were documenting stories of hunger for a national audience, the Citizens’ Crusade Against Poverty worked on co-sponsoring local hearings on hunger with Robert F. Kennedy. These hearings provided a platform for people to describe the strengths and weaknesses of subsidy programs. Over the course of two days, Kennedy visited as many eastern Kentucky towns, schools, local officials, and families as possible. Not expecting the national media interest, Kennedy’s team had not made arrangements for a media bus. But the trip—like John F. Kennedy’s and Lyndon B. Johnson’s trips to Appalachia before him—brought a flurry of attention, resulting in a media caravan of up to forty cars. Reporters did not want to miss a minute of Robert Kennedy’s tour, believing that he might announce his candidacy for president. Kennedy and the caravan crawled through eastern Kentucky coal towns and hillsides. Logistical problems abounded those two days, but the national spotlight nevertheless followed Kennedy.¹⁹⁷

On February 13 and 14, 1968, Kennedy and Representative Carl D. Perkins presided over hearings in a one-room school house in Vortex, Kentucky, and a high school gymnasium in Neon, Kentucky. Themes included the need for jobs and a stronger food subsidy program.

¹⁹⁶ James L. Lamm, telegram, May 1968, Folder CM/Food, 6/21/67-to date, Box 4, WHCF, LBJ Library.

¹⁹⁷ Edelman, *Searching for America’s Heart*, 56-58. For an overview of Robert Kennedy’s tour in Eastern Kentucky, see “The Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project.”

Women on welfare spoke about male unemployment and the struggles they faced as caregivers and single mothers. For instance, Nancy Cole described herself as a widow and mother of eight, whose first husband “was burned up in the mines” and whose second husband left her. She discussed the difficulties of raising children on her own. She told about how she had been on “Welfare,” which could have meant Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps, or both. She testified, “The first part of the month we have good meals, up until about two weeks of the month, then the rest of the month we lived on beans and bread; gravy and bread for breakfast; sometimes by the last of the month we didn’t have bread in our family. We didn’t get enough Welfare.” She described how all her male children had to leave the county to find work, leaving her without a support network. “I think there should be industry put in here for the people to work at so they can support their families; people are able to work, let them work. The people here are not sorry if they have something to work at...and raise the Welfare payments so people can live like human beings instead of living like...,” she trailed off at the end.¹⁹⁸

Many testified about the inadequacies of the new food stamp system. The Food Stamp Act of 1964 revived and amended the 1930s food stamp program, which had ended after World War II (though the Department of Agriculture continued a food distribution program in many poor and distressed areas). One of the biggest complaints about the new system was that many people could not afford food stamps, or at least enough stamps to supply a family for an entire month. According to the 1964 act, families were to pay the amount they normally allotted to food purchases, and the food stamps would supplement their allowance. In the pilot program, the average family paid \$6 and received \$10 worth of food. The act also outlined how food subsidies would be provided to families with no cash income: “When the households have little or no

¹⁹⁸ “Transcript of Evidence, Hearing Held at Vortex, Kentucky”—Eastern Kentucky, U.S.S. Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty, Archived in The Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project.

income, they make only ‘token’ payments or they may receive some coupons free of charge.”

While the law gave state and local governments some room to provide food stamps to extremely poor families, the loosely written guidelines led to many poor families being denied food stamps because they could not pay. Moreover, the legislation prohibited food distribution programs in counties with food stamp programs, leaving fewer options for the extremely poor.¹⁹⁹

One antipoverty activist spoke of neighbors, “practically destitute,” who did not always have the money at the beginning of the month to buy food stamps. Impoverished families were often left to decide between paying for food stamps or buying coal for heat or clothing for children. He continued that many families faced a similar dilemma in the school lunch program. Even when schools offered reduced lunches to poor children, families with no or little income often could not afford the lunches. How and whether to pay for school lunches and food stamps became a part of the overall household equation, which bills to pay or skip and how many food stamps to buy.²⁰⁰

If one theme emerged more than any other at the Kennedy hearings it was that women kept careful accounts of income and resources to best provide for their families, and, as they explained, they often came up short.²⁰¹ Welfare recipients described in detail how many benefits they received and how they spent their money, recounting each household bill, the costs of school for children, and the amount spent on food and clothing. Their testimonies pushed back

¹⁹⁹ The Food Stamp Act of 1964, Public Law 88-525, August, 31, 1964, http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/PL_88-525.pdf.

²⁰⁰ “Transcript of Evidence, Hearing Held at Vortex, Kentucky” and “Transcript of Evidence, Hearing Held at Fleming-Neon, Kentucky.”

²⁰¹ I draw on Susan Porter Benson, *Household Accounts: Working-Class Family Economies in the Interwar United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007). Benson explains the working-class family economy: a term which includes “the range of decisions families made about earning and spending money as well as their efforts to avoid the money economy through a whole range of non-market activities.” The working-class, urban families she focuses on in the interwar years “lived in a complex economy in which scarcity conditioned daily life and plans for the future,” 7. Striking similarities exist between the urban women of the interwar years and the rural women of the 1960s I discuss here.

against stereotypes of welfare recipients as deficient household managers. Rather, these women articulated how carefully they documented expenses and how difficult it was to stay ahead when the adults in the house were unemployed or underemployed. Many of the women argued that they needed more—the subsidies were not always sufficient—but their testimonies also suggest how federal subsidies made the difference between struggling and outright starving.

Housewife Betty Terrill described the web of financial problems many faced when she described how she and her unemployed husband supported themselves and six children. Her husband had worked as a farmhand, receiving \$3 a day, but he had been laid off. Fortunately, they qualified for aid. They paid \$50 for \$102 worth of food stamps, and they received \$69 a month in Social Security benefits for two of her children whose biological father had died in an accident. They “got by” on food stamps and with the garden, hog, and cow they kept. But they had no income to buy anything else, such as textbooks or school lunches for the children. At the time of the hearings, she owed money to the school lunch program. She described the situation: “Of course I want to pay it if I can and I feel that anybody that can pay it should pay it, but right now we just can’t.” Terrill confessed that her biggest fear was that her children might have to quit school because she could not afford to send them.²⁰²

Gussie Davis of Pike County told a similar story of hardship and resilience, but her experience was complicated further because she had an adult son who was mentally ill. Davis began her testimony: “I’m a welfare recipient. I practically raised my family on welfare. I raised nine children.” At the time of the testimony Davis had an 11-year old child and a 23-year old son living at home. Like women who testified before her, she ticked off her household expenses: “I only get \$101.60; I get \$39 welfare and \$61 social security and I have to pay \$20 a month house

²⁰² “Transcript of Evidence, Hearing Held at Vortex, Kentucky” and “Transcript of Evidence, Hearing Held at Fleming-Neon, Kentucky,” Field Hearings—Eastern Kentucky.

rent and pay \$15 and sometimes a little more for power bill. I have to buy my coal and it takes at least two tons a month, I mean through the cold part of the winter, and takes \$10 to get it, if not more, and my baby goes to school and I have to pay 30 cents a day for its lunch.” She explained that with transportation costs to travel to the food stamp office, she spent almost \$35 to obtain \$40 worth of food stamps. Davis’s life had become more difficult since her adult son had moved in with her and quit work because of “busted nerves.” She could not afford medical care for him, but she was reluctant to send him away to an institution. She believed that with her care he might get better and eventually be able to work again, but she struggled to support him. She ended by saying that she was willing to work outside of her home but that raising nine children had taken a toll on her body, and she was not able to work a heavy job (one might add that she had worked a heavy, physically demanding job most of her life). Gussie Davis’s testimony provoked expressions of disbelief from Kennedy. “Can you really support your family and survive on this amount?” he queried. Davis responded, “No, I sure can’t.”²⁰³

At times the testimonies turned to state and national politics and pressed the Congressmen to address the slew of problems facing the nation in the late 1960s. One of the most outspoken of those to testify was Mary Rice Farris, one of the few African Americans in attendance. She described herself as a representative of a delegation of Madison County and explained how she worked on behalf of the Appalachian people in a Community Action Group. She described the make-up of the group: “We were poor ourselves and raised in poverty and married in the Depression and raised our children in poverty, so now we are working with Community Action Agencies, with the poor people.” Along with couching her testimony in a long history of struggle, more than others she related the problem of hunger and poverty to other issues: local political machines, the war in Vietnam, and racial discrimination. She described

²⁰³ Ibid.

how her community's food distribution program (they did not have food stamps) was administered unfairly, with people receiving food based on who they knew. Despite the problems of the food stamp program, to Farris, the food commodities program was worse. She described the bugs and worms that plagued the meal, flour, and raisins. And she explained that a recent survey showed that most people in the county wanted to replace the commodities program with a food stamp program, in which they could choose and purchase their food and be guaranteed better quality and a more balanced diet.²⁰⁴

After describing the food issues in the county, Farris declared that she had questions for Perkins. “[Why are we] spending \$70 million dollars a day in Vietnam, plus loss of life, when [there] are millions of people in our area hungry, without homes and decent housing, or without clothing. And we would also like to know why the Negro is having to fight too for a decent place in society as a rightful citizen? Why we, as American Negroes, are having to fight and speak out for a right to take decent responsibility in this great nation?” Farris took the opportunity to challenge the idea that poverty and hunger—the issues at center of the hearings—could be separated from questions of political power and racial equality. Kennedy joked that Farris had “turned this hearing around,” and Perkins gave the pithy response, “I do not have the answers to her questions, so that’s it.” But Farris kept on, revealing that even if she had problems with national political decisions, she still supported Kennedy. As she closed her testimony, she told Kennedy that one of her delegates asked her to pass along a message: “please run for President.”²⁰⁵

Women’s testimonies at the Kennedy public hearings help us to understand how they

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

perceived the problems of poverty and how they envisioned the path to financial security. While men also spoke at the hearings, they mostly focused on jobs and the decline of mining. Women articulated a broader vision of economic justice, emphasizing the need for better educational programs, health care, and more generous welfare programs. They recognized the need for jobs for men, but their testimonies also underscored how, without a strong social safety net, women could not perform the work of caregiving. Nor was their concern about men's jobs simply about wages. Women's testimonies reveal distress that kin networks and community relationships were splintering under the weight of poverty as young people left home to look for work. Viola Davis, a housewife and resident of Wolfe County, Kentucky, acknowledged a declining population and an up-tick in out-migration when she declared, "We need something that will keep what we make here."²⁰⁶ Men were disabled; children dropped out of school; husbands and sons left the mountains for better work opportunities elsewhere. Yes, the women testified, they needed food assistance, but their testimonies reveal deeper concerns as they took the opportunity to shed light on many facets of poverty that they witnessed and experienced.

The field hearings in eastern Kentucky pushed against the images of the poor that often appeared in magazine articles and television documentaries. Those reports were important—in fact, many local activists used them to bolster local campaigns—but they could also sent a message of apathy or hopelessness. In contrast, the public hearings revealed how, given the opportunity, poor people were eager to solve problems in their own communities. The women and men who spoke explained their circumstances in great detail, revealing the complex configuration of poverty that simply could not be pinned on the failings of an individual. They offered evaluations of the welfare, food stamp, and school lunch programs, acknowledging the importance of existing programs, but also explaining the limitations.

²⁰⁶ "Transcript of Evidence, Hearing Held at Vortex, Kentucky," Field Hearings—Eastern Kentucky.

In the months and years following Kennedy's tour, community activists in eastern Kentucky campaigned to force local officials to abide by state and federal laws and to provide more effective food stamp and school lunch services. They did so by spreading information about new federal legislation, networking with regional and national welfare groups, and using their knowledge to put pressure on local officials to follow the law. Their campaigns led to more effective food stamp programs as well as widespread school lunch programs. Moreover, these campaigns helped to connect them to a broad-based welfare rights movement. As Appalachians joined welfare rights organizations, their analysis sharpened, and they connected a whole host of issues—from food programs to public assistance and access to health care and black lung benefits—under the big tent of welfare rights.

Welfare Rights in Appalachia

By 1967 the National Welfare Rights Organization had organized in Washington, D.C., under the leadership of George Wiley and with the support of hundreds of African American mothers from Boston to Louisville to Los Angeles. Women in Appalachia also picked up the mantle of welfare rights. Using the spaces and networks they had developed in the early years of the War on Poverty, local leaders mounted campaigns and organized workshops on the rights of welfare recipients and poor people more broadly. As in the national organization, regional campaigns in Appalachia brought together welfare recipients, poor mothers, lawyers, middle-class liberals, anti-poverty workers, and local allies. And as the local movement expanded, it intersected with the more well-known welfare rights movement led by African American women.

When activists from Appalachia spoke of welfare, they did not mean solely Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). They almost always included discussions of health care, food stamps, and black lung benefits. But as scholars of the American welfare state have shown, in the 1960s, welfare became identified with AFDC on both the political left and right, as conservative politicians vilified single mothers and activists on the left celebrated the National Welfare Rights Organization, which focused on AFDC for single, black mothers. While it is true that “welfare” came to be associated with black mothers who received public assistance, that process was not immediate or inevitable, especially given the fact that white people made up the majority of welfare recipients. The history of the predominantly white and poor people in Appalachia who turned out to public hearings and organized welfare rights organizations offers a different way of understanding the political and cultural struggle over welfare. Theirs is a story of coalition and of working across racial boundaries and bonding around a vision of community, in which poor women, disabled men, the working poor and their families had fundamental rights to health, welfare, and education.

The welfare rights movement in Appalachia was interracial at a moment when interracial coalitions seemed harder and harder to achieve, and it was a mixed-sex organization even as welfare was closely associated with poor mothers. This regional movement projected an understanding of welfare that would become less popular over the next decades: that to accept welfare assistance was not a matter of dependency, nor was it naturally tied to one’s race or gender; rather it was a necessity in a nation founded upon equality. Appalachian activists, in particular, made moral claims about widespread poverty in a region that had made great sacrifices, in the form of mineral extraction and the heavy burden of work in the coal mines as well as the toll both took on communities.

Most discussions of welfare in the U.S. have focused on urban areas, where black women made up the majority of welfare recipients. While the percentages of black Appalachians living below the poverty line and receiving welfare were higher than those of white Appalachians, the very low population of black Appalachians meant that they did not become the face of poverty as they did elsewhere. The relationship between African American women and welfare that so defined perceptions of welfare in the 1960s did not hold true in most communities in Appalachia. In eastern Kentucky blacks made up about two percent of the population between 1960 and 1970. In other key sites of antipoverty activism in Appalachia, such as West Virginia, the population was a bit higher, but still low at five percent. In 1969, poverty rates by county in eastern Kentucky ranged between 40 and 60 percent of the total population.²⁰⁷

Nonetheless, black Appalachians were the worst off among the poor population in Appalachia. As historian William H. Turner has shown, black poverty was higher in Appalachia compared to black poverty nationally. And within Appalachia, the median income for blacks was about half of the median income for whites. The welfare rates in mountain areas of Kentucky were nearly 16 percent for all races, but nearly 21 percent for black Appalachians. These numbers point to the particular struggles of poor blacks in Appalachia who faced job discrimination in an economically depressed region. But they also suggest the complicated relationship between race and poverty in Appalachia. On the one hand, poverty was worse for blacks, but on the other poor whites made up the overwhelming majority of the poor population in Appalachia. The concentration of whites who received public assistance mitigated easy associations between black Appalachians, poverty, and welfare and shaped welfare debates in

²⁰⁷ William H. Turner, "The Demography of Black Appalachia: Past and Present," in *Blacks in Appalachia*, eds. William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1985), 237-261. Turner uses the Appalachian Regional Commission's definition of the Appalachian region.

Appalachia. The overall high rates of poverty—black and white—ultimately led to interracial organizing around welfare.²⁰⁸

Histories of the welfare rights movement have concentrated on the experiences of African American women who were the leaders and foot soldiers in the movement. They had the most to gain from reforms to Aid to Families with Dependent Children, as they bore the brunt of abuses from case workers who conducted “midnight raids” and policed women’s personal lives. As more African American women gained access to the welfare rolls in the 1960s, many states erected rules that targeted African American women in attempts to prevent them from receiving aid. Shining a light on these policies, welfare rights activists helped to spark a movement of black women. Less understood is how poor white women and men engaged the burgeoning welfare rights movement.²⁰⁹

Like their African American counterparts, whites on welfare faced work requirements where there was little work to be had; they received inadequate cash assistance; and they were not guaranteed due process when dropped from the welfare rolls. In Appalachia, where many welfare recipients lived in rural areas far away from county seats or cities, they had the added burden of balancing the need for food and income with the costs of traveling to welfare offices. Following the lead of African American welfare rights groups, yet also bringing their particular concerns to the fore, white Appalachians joined the welfare rights movement in calling for an adequate and more dignified welfare system. While African American welfare rights activists often understood their activism as part of the civil rights movement, white Appalachian activists built on the antipoverty movement.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement*; Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*; Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*; Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace*.

Yet, it was not a given that poor whites and their allies in the antipoverty programs would be receptive to the welfare rights movement, even if they relied upon a strong social safety net. Well into the 1960s, antipoverty officials and activists in Appalachia revealed fears that welfare might lead to dependence. For instance, at the Appalachian Community Meeting in Washington, D.C., in August 1966, around the time that the National Welfare Rights Organization was getting off the ground, antipoverty activists expressed concerns that public assistance with no work attached to it could do more harm than good. Coal-mining and farming, the traditional hubs of male employment and family income, were in decline as small farms became less viable and the coal industry mechanized. Able-bodied men who moved to industrial sectors in the North and Midwest left behind the young, elderly, and disabled. While the report mentioned nothing about women, presumably women stayed behind and continued their unpaid reproductive labor, with welfare assistance. The report pointed out that many Appalachian counties the proportion of the population receiving welfare payments was 30 percent and higher and warned that the high rates of welfare in Appalachia represented endemic powerlessness in the region, and that “welfare paternalism” also threatened to “become a way of life for an entire social group.” The committee of activists assumed that a “welfare culture” had developed in Appalachia and offered guidelines for improving the welfare system so that more people had the opportunity to move from assistance to full employment.²¹⁰

The report’s analysis of the welfare state in Appalachia hinged on assumptions about male independence and family structures. At the same time that activists were concerned about dependency, they nonetheless believed that better assistance for the male head-of-household was the best route to lift families out of poverty. They argued for a robust, short-term welfare that

²¹⁰ “The Problem of Participation in Community Action Programs: Impressions and Suggestions,” Appalachian Community Meeting, Washington, D.C., August 21-22, 1966, Box 8, Folder 7, AV Records.

would keep families out of poverty as men searched for work; the more quickly men could move from welfare to work the better. A shorter but more generous period of assistance would guard against a cycle of poverty. The current system, they argued, bred “distrust and hostility” in male recipients because it undermined his “control over decisions which effect him, his way of life—his income, his expenditures, and his food,” as he was forced to defer to welfare case workers.²¹¹ There was one glaring problem with this analysis: it did not take into consideration the effects of the coal industry in the region, with its frequent layoffs and high rates of men who were physically disabled or killed in the mines. Employment for the analysts equaled “independence,” but labor in the mines could make one dependent on others in the blink of an eye.

The report ignored the position of women in the political economy of Appalachia. This oversight was not confined to antipoverty workers in Appalachia; indeed, War on Poverty programs in general rarely addressed sex oppression, the disproportionate numbers of women, children, and the elderly in poverty, or the effects of male unemployment on women’s lives.²¹² The analysts disregarded women, who were the primary recipients of public assistance, indicating expectations that white Appalachian families were headed by males who expected to support families through gainful employment, not public assistance. Women were assumed to be dependent on the breadwinner husband or father, and women’s domestic and caregiving labor—and the idea that it should be compensated—was simply not considered.

Paradoxically the report focused on the small, pilot program Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Unemployed Parents (AFDC-UP) and male welfare recipients, even though families with unemployed fathers made up only five percent of the AFDC rolls in

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Orleck, “Introduction: The War on Poverty from the Grassroots Up,” 18-19.

1967.²¹³ Anti-poverty workers' analysis of welfare was shaped by the belief that it represented a sign of weakness in the family and broader society, especially when men were the recipients. They saw families splintering in Appalachia because of migration and unemployment, and they looked to models from the past as they sought to make recommendations. Families had always been more stable if a working male headed the household; thus one method of solving poverty would be to connect welfare to job training programs and temporary, generous benefits that could provide them a measure of security while they sought employment.

While staff of antipoverty organizations voiced concern over the impact of welfare on Appalachian communities, local female activists in eastern Kentucky worked with welfare recipients in their communities and sought to strengthen poor people's access to welfare. Through their actions on the ground—driving women to welfare offices, putting pressure on local and state officials to expand programs, and joining welfare rights organizations—they reflected a belief that welfare was a necessity, an obligation of the local and state government to provide basic needs to its citizens. They did so with concerns rooted in place and in the experiences of low-income families in a single-industry economy.

From the outset, local antipoverty activists identified access to welfare as a key issue. Antipoverty workers in volunteer programs frequently addressed problems facing welfare recipients: including misunderstandings by welfare recipients about their rights and how much support they qualified for; difficulty traveling from rural communities to the welfare offices in town; and rules mandated by case workers that made it difficult to file for or keep aid. For example, many food stamp recipients resided in rural and isolated communities and had no cars or access to public transportation. They found it difficult to travel to the county seat every month

²¹³ Frances Fox-Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 127.

to receive food stamp benefits. Moreover, the rules and requirements negated the benefits of receiving aid and placed a disproportionate burden on recipients to prove they were not committing fraud. The initial registration often took hours of waiting for a detailed interview, and the office required personal interviews every month to insure that recipients were still in need of aid. The result was that people with little or no income, most often elderly widows, retired miners, and single mothers, were required to travel to the county seat monthly to be questioned by case workers about how they paid bills or whether they had another source of income that month. As one report concluded, the procedure implied “a deep suspicion of the people the program was intended to help,” and the process failed to acknowledge that small shifts in income were often temporary and rarely led to financial stability.²¹⁴

As an antipoverty worker with the Appalachian Volunteers, Edith Easterling advocated for people who needed welfare but were unsure about the process. She told one story of helping a man who had been turned away from the welfare office for two weeks and came to Easterling and asked for her help. As Easterling remembered:

Now this is God Almighty's truth. We got to the door and went in...I went up to the office. I told him, get you a seat and I went up to the desk. And I said, “I brought Mr. so-and-so here, because he's entitled to welfare. He's come to sign up for welfare and that's what we're doing here. And he's been here every day for two weeks and he's been put off. He's not being put off today. He's come to sign up because he's *entitled*. And she said, “Yes m'am, yes m'am.” She got up and went back and this woman called him back there, and he said to me, “Mrs. Easterling, will you go with me?” And she said, “She doesn't have to.” And I said, “Yes, but he asked me.” And when we went back she said, “Well, this is really none of your concern.” And I said, “It's a whole lot of my concern. When you have put this guy off for two weeks and he's entitled and he's got all of the qualifications he needs, but you didn't want to sign him up.” And I said, “It's a whole lot of my concern.” And she said, “Yes m'am, yes m'am.” And she signed him up without any to-do. And when he got out, he said, “Can you believe that?” And see that's the reason they didn't like me. They hated me. They said I was trying to duplicate their work, and I was trying to tell them what to do, how to do their work.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ “White Papers, Preface,” 1966, Box 8, Folder 4, AV Records.

²¹⁵ Easterling, interview by Kinderman.

Easterling's story is one among many that point to how women activists learned to navigate the welfare offices and gained the confidence to advocate for recipients, arguing that poor people were entitled to benefits. In her re-telling, Easterling emphasized the class barriers of the welfare office and defied easy stereotypes of poor people. When the case worker questioned Easterling's concern with the man's welfare application, Easterling responded that his plight was "a whole lot of my concern." Easterling revealed class solidarity with the man as well as an underlying ethic of care that eschewed notions of the undeserving poor and upheld the idea that community people had obligations to one another, not to a faceless bureaucracy.

In August 1967, Edith Easterling organized a workshop with National Welfare Rights Organization staff person Tim Sampson. Sampson, a white activist who had volunteered in the farmworker's movement before becoming Assistant Director of the Poverty/Rights Action Center affiliated with the NWRO, had worked closely with Johnnie Tillmon and George Wiley in the early stages of the organization.²¹⁶ Easterling arranged for Sampson to meet with Appalachian Volunteers and other organizers and to have a separate meeting with a group of welfare recipients so that he could learn "what's happening." She requested that Sampson discuss examples of successful poor-white welfare rights groups, changes in disability laws and how they might affect welfare recipients, and "the National Welfare Rights Organization, especially the white-black issue that some of our people talked about after they had gone to your last convention." It is unclear what Easterling meant by the "white-black issue," for, other than one mention, the records from that meeting are silent about race relations. Instead, the meeting

²¹⁶ Since its inception, the NWRO had taken the stance that "poverty and poor people, not just black people" could benefit from the organization. They also worked to overturn the associations between welfare and African American women, pointing out that the majority of welfare recipients were white. Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger, 1981), 22, 60, 83-83.

focused largely on the challenges of place and the particular needs of welfare recipients in a rural region.²¹⁷

Easterling asked Sampson to discuss specific techniques for organizing a rural population of welfare recipients. Sampson urged the organizers to think about a central theme to bring people together, using the union tradition in Appalachia as an example of a bond based on labor conditions. He posited that “the bond is the basic thing in common that all the people have, underlying and related to the issues.” The central issue, of course, was welfare; yet Sampson pushed the organizers to think about welfare broadly, especially in Appalachia where families often drew more than one kind of check. The issue was not AFDC for mothers solely, but how to access aid in general, whether one was elderly, disabled, unemployed, or a single mother. At the same time, Sampson warned that organizers needed to acknowledge the different treatment of Social Security recipients, typically male, and welfare recipients, typically female. He noted that welfare recipients “tend to be put down more severely” and that “fear of being cut or punished is often great and often without reason.” Sampson’s visit to the Marrowbone Folk School and his emphasis on dignity, respect, and social bonds between poor people reflected the NWRO’s position that the welfare rights movement would be most powerful if it was a broad-based, multi-racial coalition.²¹⁸

Thelma Parker, a young white woman from Harlan County who worked for the Appalachian Volunteers, was among those in attendance at the welfare rights meetings at the Marrowbone Folk School. She was born and raised in a coal camp in Highsplint, Kentucky,

²¹⁷ Easterling to fellow organizers, July 22, 1968, and Easterling to Tim Sampson, July 1968, Box 51, Folder 15, AV Records.

²¹⁸ Meeting notes on the Tim Sampson Sunday Session at the Marrowbone Folk School, August 6, 1968, Box 51, Folder 5, AV Records.

where her father worked in the coal mines. She was a teenager when the coal industry began to collapse following the post-war boom. During her junior year of high school, mines started shutting down, pushing hundreds of families out of the region in search of employment. Her junior class at Evarts High School was made up of close to 400 people, but she graduated with only 111 people in her class in 1963. After graduation she followed the migrant path to Cincinnati to work. Just a few years later she was drawn back home to be with her ailing father. But she had also learned about the VISTA program during a television news broadcast and by 1967 was working as a staff person, first as a VISTA and later as an Appalachian Volunteer.²¹⁹

Parker brought to her work a compassion for people who struggled to gain access to basic services. She was angered when she saw how middle-class professionals could deny poor people care and respect. As a community worker, she became acutely aware of the barriers that kept poor people from the services available to them. She recalled the story of Mrs. Huff, a white woman who lived across the lane from her family. Mrs. Huff “was elderly, she had no income, she got sixteen dollars a month [worth of] food stamps.” Parker took the woman to appointments at the comprehensive health care center, where Huff had been told that she qualified for free care. Parker fumed as she remembered one appointment when the receptionist chided Mrs. Huff in front of a waiting room full of people, “Mrs. Huff, if you don’t pay some on your bill today, you won’t be allowed to see the doctor. This is not a charity place.” Humiliated, Mrs. Huff began crying and left the office. Even after Parker said “some pretty smart things” to the receptionist and confirmed with the director of the center that Mrs. Huff indeed qualified for free care, she could not convince Huff to return. To Parker, the incident confirmed that “Mountain people are proud people. Even if they need help, they don’t like to take it.” Yet, this story also reveals how

²¹⁹ Witt, interview by Zingg.

the power of humiliation, firmly in the middle-class woman's grasp, could deter poor people from requesting the aid for which they officially qualified.²²⁰

Parker began working to provide basic necessities and goods that especially benefited women and caregivers in Harlan County. In 1967, she and another volunteer developed a child care center in the community of Closplint after surveying the community about what kind of program they would like to see. They rented an old boarding house for twenty dollars a month, collected supplies, and turned two rooms of the house into a child care center. The daycare usually drew twelve to fourteen kids and served black and white families. Some whites in the community disapproved of the center's policy of racial inclusion, but Parker, who watched friendships develop between black and white children, realized that the best way to eradicate racial prejudices in children was to foster relationships between black and white children. The program was so successful that by early 1968 the state-wide program Kentucky Child Welfare funded the center and, in a bittersweet move from the activists' perspective, took it over.²²¹

Parker became one of the primary organizers of the Kentucky Mountain Welfare Rights Organization. Just before its formation, an African American woman who had organized welfare recipients in Chicago visited Harlan County and gave a speech. The woman's message—that “you shouldn't look down on people drawing welfare”—resonated with Parker. As she remembers, the local welfare rights group formed shortly after the Chicago woman's visit. The group rented space in a garage where members could hold meetings, and they decided together what programs to operate.²²²

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Witt, interview by Zingg; Witt, et al., interview with author.

²²² Witt, et al., interview with author.

From the start the Harlan County group was diverse, drawing African Americans from the segregated, small black mining communities in the county as well as white women, elderly men, and disabled miners. The Kentucky Mountain Welfare Rights Organization (KMWRO) began with thirteen members; by 1970 it had grown to nearly seventy dues-paying members representing fourteen communities in Harlan County. Jeanette Knowles, who worked closely with Parker, described the welfare rights movement in Harlan County as “a big net.” She remembers, “A lot of people could fit into that net, whereas a lot couldn’t fit into a black lung group and all this other stuff. But welfare rights really collected a lot of people we met.”²²³

In the summer of 1967 the group led a successful petition for a food stamp office in Evarts, site of the famous 1931 United Mine Workers’ strike known as the Battle of Evarts. Parker worked with volunteer Sam Howie on establishing a food stamp extension office after complaints by recipients that they had to travel to the county seat and stand in long lines, often for hours, to receive their food stamps. The organization helped dozens of people apply for food stamps, welfare, and Social Security. It successfully petitioned the county court to set aside \$250 for text books for school children who could not afford to purchase them. The sum was not nearly enough, but it was a start. Turning their attention to health needs, organizers started a disability study in Harlan County, planned health fairs, and began work to establish a community health center. They also started a volunteer-run, used-clothing store, and, though it was short-lived, they opened a sewing co-op so that local women could supplement their incomes. While some of these programs were more successful than others, the sum total reveals the multi-pronged approach that local groups took when addressing the many facets of poverty.²²⁴

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Witt, interview by Zingg; “Kentucky Mountain Welfare Rights Organization, Box 49, Folder 40, CSM Records II.

As a member of the National Welfare Rights Organization, the group also joined the nation-wide movement to guarantee all Americans a basic standard of living. Along with the local meeting in Pike County that Edith Easterling organized, they attended conferences in Louisville and joined a state-wide coalition of welfare rights organizers who traveled to the state capital Frankfort regularly to petition office holders for better welfare. They also joined national conferences in Jackson, Mississippi, and Washington, D.C.²²⁵

In January 1968 representatives from eastern Kentucky joined a coalition of Kentucky welfare rights groups in Frankfort to present a four-point resolution to the State Legislature on how to improve the state welfare system. The *Courier Journal & Times* reported on the meeting, with the loaded headline “Mountain Women Join Negro Mothers to Push for Welfare.” The paper reported, “An unlikely coalition of East Kentucky women and Negro mothers from urban Kentucky will petition the state legislature on a common problem this week: not enough welfare.” The column exposed how many people viewed race and class in the 1960s. “Mountain women” did not need racial or class descriptors; they were presumed to be white, thus the “unlikely coalition” that crossed boundaries of race. The reporter also noted that a handful of men (most likely white) joined 36 women; however, they appeared “ill at ease,” presumably discomfited by the fact that the coalition was led by white and black women.²²⁶ The reporter’s ignorance of the existence of black Appalachians and surprise that white and black, male and female welfare recipients worked in coalition speaks volumes about the racial and gender assumptions of the time.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ “Mountain Women Join Negro Mothers to Push for Welfare,” *Courier-Journal*, January 28, 1968.

Within the group itself, the welfare rights coalition showed no evidence of tensions based on race or gender difference. Their four-point plan called for the state to meet 100 percent of the living needs of Kentucky families, based on the national poverty line (as opposed to the 87 percent that they provided at the time); a general emergency assistance program for people who did not meet the requirements for AFDC or aid to the blind, disabled, and aged; an end to the policy stating that child support payments should be deducted from the welfare allowance provided for single mothers; and the creation of a board of independent examiners to hear complaints about mistreatment by case workers.²²⁷

The coalition, which coalesced into a loose state-wide confederation called the Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization, continued its efforts to meet with state officials in the following year. In May 1969 welfare activists requested a meeting with Governor Louie B. Nunn at his office in Frankfort to discuss pending cuts in Medicaid and AFDC. As part of the 1967 Social Security Amendment, Congress had approved a freeze on AFDC payments to women who had children out of wedlock. Scheduled to take effect in 1969, the cuts would limit payments to state AFDC funds, and payments would drop from \$29 a month to \$20. Welfare rights activists wanted Governor Nunn to commit to making up the difference if the freeze went into effect. (Nixon ultimately repealed it.) Activists used the threat of the freeze to raise broader issues. In flyers distributed ahead of time, they demanded that the Kentucky government raise welfare benefits to keep up with the cost of living and “that welfare recipients have a VOICE in determining the cost of living increases.”²²⁸

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Poster from Welfare Rights Protest, Box 107, Folder 9, CSM Records II.

About a month later on June 20, 1969, the state coalition staged another protest at the Governor's office. Over 150 black and white, male and female welfare rights activists from Lexington, Louisville, and counties in the eastern part of the state marched to the state Capitol to raise the voices of welfare recipients. They were joined by an "assorted group of state employees," and members of the Kentucky Christian Leadership Conference, including Reverend Leo Lesser who announced to the crowd, "We're here today to tell the welfare mothers that they don't stand alone in their plight." Welfare recipients offered testimonies about the difficulty of paying for food and medicine. One woman countered stereotypes, stating, "I don't want no Cadillac. I don't want no fancy house. I'm just asking you all to help me get some medicine and some food for my mouth." One of the activists read a letter from a Kentucky chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, describing the present welfare system as "repressive and an affront to human dignity."²²⁹

While they were in part motivated by the budget originating at the federal level that would lead to cuts in AFDC, their march brought many more issues to the surface. They argued that their payments were too low to support a family; they noted that payments had not been adjusted to keep up with inflation; and they chided Governor Nunn for refusing to meet with them. They criticized Kentucky legislators and the governor for not being transparent about all of the proposed cuts to Medicaid and AFDC. Governor Nunn's office announced that he could not meet with the activists because he was preparing for a trip to Switzerland, prompting more out cry from the activists. They noted that Governor Nunn refused to make time for them, but he had made a trip to Washington, D.C. the week prior to lobby against taxes that would adversely affect horse farmers. The comparison prompted witty slogans, including "Kentucky: Fast Horses,

²²⁹ Bill Peterson, "150 Poor People Air Complaints at Capitol," *Courier-Journal*, June 21, 1969.

Pretty Women, and Starving Kids.” The chairwoman of the Lexington WRO stated, “I believe no thoroughbred horse in Kentucky lives off what a welfare recipient does.”²³⁰

Despite their best efforts, welfare activists faced public officials who held stubbornly to the notion that most welfare recipients were lazy and irresponsible. Economic Security Officer Merritt S. Deitz spoke to the crowd, noting that Governor Nunn was committed to welfare for “those of you who qualify and need help.” He assured them that Nunn was calling on U.S. Senators to prevent the budget freeze that would negatively impact AFDC distribution. Deitz informed the crowd that he had set up a table where recipients could provide state officials with specific complaints. “Also while you’re here,” he added, “some of you might like to wage a private war on poverty by applying for work.” Deitz had his office set up a table where welfare recipients could pick up job applications. While Dietz was not clear about who he believed really needed welfare and who he felt should be applying for jobs, presumably in his eyes, the group—which sought to elevate the common problems of poor people, regardless of race and gender—could be split into those who were deserving and those undeserving.²³¹

Such battles would continue to play out at local and state levels across the nation, as welfare rights activists asserted their belief that the government had a duty to respond to their needs and to act transparently when making decisions that affected their daily lives. They came face-to-face with politicians who often cast them as undeserving. In Kentucky black and white activists found common ground in the battle for welfare rights. Not only did black and white women (and some men) struggle to make ends meet on the current welfare payments, but all groups were familiar with the humiliation and harassment that often accompanied welfare

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

assistance, even if the harassment took different forms. Those common struggles led to an interracial, mixed-sex welfare rights movement that was distinct for the time.

An Appalachian Movement

As local people pressed for more responsive welfare agencies and a welfare system that would actually help lift people out of poverty, they also started to push progressive reform agencies to open their doors more fully to poor people. The year following the Poor People's Campaign and the rise of a regional welfare rights movement, the Council of the Southern Mountains underwent a fundamental change. Poor and working-class Appalachians demanded majority representation on the Council of the Southern Mountain's board, which decided how antipoverty resources were allocated. Poor people and young activists campaigned for an overhaul of the Council's board and mission at the annual conference in the spring of 1969 in Fontana, North Carolina. The conference crowd included poor mothers and disabled coal miners, college administrators and social workers, young leftists and seasoned civil rights activists, all with an interest in the future of Appalachia. Some of the attendees—especially those associated with Highlander Folk School—had been planning for months fundamentally to alter the character and the direction of the Council, remaking it to reflect the interests of people in Appalachia, including poor and working-class people, students, African Americans, and mothers on welfare. The culmination of events over the weekend of the conference led to a “takeover” of the Council by poor people and left-leaning activists.

The stories of the takeover are numerous and include memories of young leftists disavowing the authority of the white liberal establishment and of poor people, young people, and African Americans radicalizing the Council. One Council member, critical of the leaders of

the takeover, charged that they had learned their tactics from “the movies on the Black Panthers and on the Columbia demonstrations,” and another wrote that the event was “a mockery of due process.” Community organizer Monica Kelly, who supported the changes, offered another view. She admitted that in past conferences she had felt more like an “observer than participant,” but that the new Council represented “confrontation, delight, discovery.”²³²

Historians too have written about the takeover in detail. In his classic book *Modernizing the Mountaineer*, David Whisnant characterized the 1969-1970 shift in the Council as the result of an ideological division between older, liberal, paternalistic professionals who romanticized Appalachian culture and younger, New Left, ideologically-driven activists who romanticized “the struggle.” Taking a slightly different approach in his analysis of the War on Poverty, Thomas Kiffmeyer has written that the takeover was a referendum on federal anti-poverty programs and an effort by Appalachians to take control of the Council and cast off the young outsider activists who had been central to the Council’s War on Poverty programs.²³³ Both analyses are narratives of declension that parallel many of the histories of this era. These narratives focus largely on the failures of the War on Poverty and the fragmentation of social

²³² For full coverage and commentary on the conference, see *Mountain Life and Work*, May 1969; description of the conference also draws from oral history interviews: Kobak, interview with author, May 2010 and August 2011; Loyal Jones, interview with author, June 2012.

²³³ See Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountain*; Kiffmeyer, “Looking Back to the City in the Hills: The Council of the Southern Mountains and a Longer View of the War on Poverty in the Appalachian South,” 359-386. Whisnant and Kiffmeyer trace the internal divisions within the Council and do not place the direction of the Council within the political milieu of the 1960s. My analysis parallels that of Ronald D. Eller in *Uneven Ground*. He contends that the Council’s radical turn had its foundation in the War on Poverty: “What had begun as a nationally initiated and locally fought campaign to bring poor people into the mainstream of modern American life had stirred a collective response in Appalachia that not only redefined regional identity but cast the social and economic troubles of the mountains in a broader context,” 170. Eller argues that a regional consciousness arose out of this new context. I agree with his analysis, but I also see the movement as interwoven with the “movement of movements” of the late 1960s and 1970s.

movements.²³⁴ It was certainly the case that by the late 1960s funding for the War on Poverty had been gutted and the Council was rife with political tensions. Yet, if we consider this moment from the perspective of female and poor members of the Council, many of whom were also workers in the War on Poverty, the takeover signified an opening for more poor people and women to participate in Council programs and leadership than ever before. For them, the takeover reflected the movement- and alliance-building that had begun with the advent of the War on Poverty and that continued in the grassroots campaigns that made up the Appalachian Movement in the 1970s.²³⁵ The takeover was one event in a series in which Appalachian residents and activists sought to keep alive the democratic promises of the 1960s, even as the political winds shifted with the election of Richard Nixon in 1968.

Leading up to the conference, Myles Horton, who was on the conference committee, met with other Council members and urged them to begin recruiting poor people from Appalachia to the conference. Horton and the staff of Highlander had been offering workshops on Appalachian Leadership since 1967, and in the months leading up to the Fontana conference they ran workshops on “developing leadership” and “preparing” poor people in the Appalachian region for the conference. Highlander staff discussed the workshops as “part of plans to adapt the Citizenship School Program to Appalachian problems” and saw the conference as “the beginning of a program to develop an Appalachian social movement which can be made a part of the Poor People’s Coalition.”²³⁶

²³⁴ See Orleck, “Conclusion: The War on the War on Poverty and American Politics since the 1960s,” in *The War on Poverty*, 450-452.

²³⁵ See Si Kahn, “The Appalachian Movement—CSM, New Directions for the ’70s” and Mike Clark, “Education and Exploitation.” See also Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 170-171.

²³⁶ Memo on meeting attended by CSM Community Action Committee and FOCIS, October 1968, Highlander Records.

By all accounts the conference was rowdy. Under the leadership of Sue Ella Kobak, the Youth Commission of the Council recruited hundreds of young people to attend what they called the Appalachian Free University. They borrowed from the techniques they had learned in civil rights organizations, in student groups such as Students for a Democratic Society and the Southern Student Organizing Committee, and in discussion groups at Resurrection City. The workshops they planned represented all the major issues of the day, from civil rights and the draft to women's liberation. Along with panels, they showed films, including a documentary film about the Black Panther Party and *Salt of the Earth* about a strike in a Mexican-American mining community, in which miners' wives overturned gender expectations to keep the strike strong. But the majority of the panels focused on the Appalachian region, from politics and economics to labor history and what it meant to identify as Appalachian.²³⁷ The organizers of the Free University stated that their goal was to "encourage a new awareness in the youth of Appalachia" and to foster in young people a "desire to gain an Appalachian identity that they can recognize with pride."²³⁸

The Youth Commission's goal was "to achieve social change," with a focus on place, and to develop "the power of youth consciously to make relevant decisions that affect their lives and the future of this region." In one proposal, members of the Youth Commission stated that they promoted "the formation of natural coalitions between youth, both black and white, and all of those who are oppressed." For them, the exploitation of mineral-rich Appalachia by industry

²³⁷ Kobak interview with author, March and May 2011. See "The Rundown," April 9, 1969, Folder 4, "CSM Newsletters, 1968-1969," Box 20, Folder 4, AV Records.

²³⁸ "The Rundown," Box 20, Folder 4, AV Records. The rhetoric and goals of the Youth Commission parallel one of the major goals of the Black Studies Movement, to build Black consciousness among Black students. Student activists from Appalachia reflected on how to build pride and class-consciousness among Appalachian youth. On the Black Student Movement see Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

provided a powerful unifying device across race.²³⁹

In the run up to the conference, members of the Youth Commission also met with poor people's groups and discussed how they planned to make their concerns central in the Council. They ultimately formed a voting bloc that established a Black Appalachian Commission and amended the Council's by-laws to say that 51 per cent of the board of commissioners must be poor people. They also put forward resolutions opposing the war in Vietnam; calling for a guaranteed income for all Americans; and demanding that federal military spending be re-routed into domestic programs. While some called the action of the youth a "coup," others believed the conference ushered in a left-leaning philosophical shift that brought in the voices of a wider variety of people in Appalachia.²⁴⁰

While the Youth Commission was clearly a part of an American youth movement culture, middle-aged poor people had different motivations for a takeover of the Council. For them the Council provided access to resources to better serve communities. They also signaled their desire to have a seat at the table at one of the most influential organizations in the region. Mary Farris, who had challenged Kennedy during the hunger hearings, was among those who praised the new Council. "We must recognize that the Council of the Southern Mountains from its annual conference has taken on a new look, a new approach, and has grown '10 feet tall' in the eyes of the poor, the black, the youth, and other interested parties." She continued, "I feel that through their actions the Council has gained strength in a meaningful form. It has bridged the existing generation gap. It has condemned second-class citizenship and deepened its fellowship with all the people. I have confidence and hope that the Council now has a new opportunity to serve

²³⁹ "Youth Commission, Neighborhood Youth Corp Proposal, n.d.," Box 226, Folder 2, AV Records.

²⁴⁰ See individual reflections by conference participants in *Mountain Life and Work*, May 1969.

Appalachia in the coming years with eyes open to the future.’’²⁴¹

In the year after the conference, some of the liberal and moderate members of the Council resigned, including the director Loyal Jones, who had worked with the Council for twelve years. He argued that new members on the Council board cared more about their “theories” than about working on the major issues confronting Appalachians. Fundamental divides on how to solve problems associated with poverty shook the foundations of the Council. Middle-class professionals had long sought to address poverty by offering resources and educational programming. A new cadre of activists, including grassroots antipoverty activists, saw the Council as a way to build a broad-based, regional social justice movement. Yet from the perspective of Jones and others, the “far left” views of some members led to polarization. Pointing to developments in national politics, most notably the fracturing of the Democratic Party, Jones saw polarization as “a tactic and a fact in the present age” that, he predicted, would lead to the Council’s failure.²⁴²

Jones emphasized the ideological divides within the new Council, and he mourned what he saw as an end to consensus politics. Yet, larger problems threatened the Council as Nixon’s administration began dismantling the OEO, one of the major funders of the Council. Nixon appointed the junior congressman Donald H. Rumsfeld to serve as director of the OEO, despite the fact that Rumsfeld had voted against the Economic Opportunity Act. Rumsfeld presented himself as a careful administrator who would evaluate antipoverty programs and make scrupulous decisions about what to fund. In fact, Rumsfeld’s primary task was to weaken organizations that the War on Poverty had emboldened to challenge the power of state and local

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Loyal Jones, Resignation letter to the Board of Commissioners, May 28, 1970, Box 63, Folder 29, CSM Records II.

agencies.²⁴³ A month before Loyal Jones resigned from the Council, he corresponded with Rumsfeld, pleading with him to maintain funding for the Council at least through another year. Jones argued that the director of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Office of the OEO had created a web of confusion before concluding without warning to terminate grants which Jones had previously been told would be renewed. Jones was unable to win Rumsfeld's sympathy, and as he resigned from the Council, he announced to the Board that a funding crisis loomed.²⁴⁴

At the same time, middle-class members had begun leaving the Council and taking their funding and resources with them. Years later Eula Hall discussed her own involvement in the takeover, noting regrettably that she and other activists had not fully considered the effects on the organization as moderates took with them their knowledge of organizing, which would have benefited the Council in the following decades when funding became more difficult to come by.²⁴⁵ For many Council members at the time the political fractures and funding woes spelled disaster and decline, an end to the promises of the Great Society. The takeover of the Council took on symbolic significance, obscuring the broader challenges that all antipoverty organizations faced as Nixon instructed his administrators to dismantle key programs of the War on Poverty, but also the ways in which the antipoverty movement persisted in Appalachia.

In fact, a decade following the 1969 conference, the Appalachian Movement gained momentum and the issues represented at the conference continued to resonate, especially those of poor people's and welfare rights. With the changes in the Council's structure, more poor

²⁴³ See Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 338-340. For other examples of how the re-organization of the OEO affected antipoverty organizations, see Great De Jong, "Plantation Politics: The Tufts-Delta health Center and Intraracial Class Conflict in Mississippi, 1965-1972," in *The War on Poverty*, 270-273; Daniel M. Cobb, "The War on Poverty in Mississippi and Oklahoma: Beyond Black and White," in *The War on Poverty*, 401-402.

²⁴⁴ Loyal Jones to Donald Rumsfeld, April 1, 1970 and April 16, 1970, Box 63, Folder 23, CSM Records II; Loyal Jones, Resignation letter to the Board of Commissioners, May 28, 1970.

²⁴⁵ Eula Hall, interview by Harry Rice.

people and women entered leadership positions. And over the next decade, the Council provided a clearinghouse for grassroots campaigns throughout Appalachia and proved an important resource for spreading news and connecting activists. To be sure, the Council never regained its status as the largest reform agency in the region, but it continued to provide an important network for the people who saw themselves as part of a regionally-conscious movement.

The takeover of the Council signaled a shift in the identity, from an association of professionals—educators, social workers, and ministers—to a network of activists that emphasized an Appalachian identity not simply about cultural heritage, but about politics as well. Some Council leaders announced a new drive toward “Appalachian Self-Determination.” Key to this more politicized identity was the development of Appalachian Studies programs, which was accompanied by a flurry of published papers and articles that identified Appalachia as an “internal colony.”²⁴⁶

Drawing on the energy of the youth movement in Appalachia and the Appalachian Free University, in 1970 scholar activists and students began to develop a curriculum for Appalachian Studies. Teachers, students, and activists came together at conferences to develop academic programs in Appalachian Studies. At the conference “Tomorrow’s People,” at Clinch Valley College in Wise, Virginia, scholars and activists considered the best approaches to education in Appalachia and how to develop programs that acknowledged the complexity of mountain people and analyzed the economy and politics in the region. Helen Lewis, who taught a seminar on Appalachia at Clinch Valley College, argued for colleges of the region to “see themselves as part of the Appalachian community” and suggested that students “should become knowledgeable about Appalachian history and aware of themselves as Appalachians and as exploited people.”

²⁴⁶ See Lewis, et al., *Colonialism in Modern America*.

Among the activist speakers, Edith Easterling, representing the Marrowbone Folk School, argued for a stronger educational system that would provide students in secondary schools and colleges with skills to be able to contribute to their communities. As things were, young people felt pressure to leave the region in order to pursue careers. To be able to contribute in meaningful ways, the presenters noted, students needed to understand the history and culture of the region, and they needed to be given opportunities to invest in their home communities.²⁴⁷

The presenters at the conference looked for models in Black Studies programs, which grew out of the Black Power and Black student movements. In the discussion that followed the conference, speakers noted that Black Studies programs had to develop educational material and that should be one of the first goals of Appalachian scholars. Through new materials, teachers could begin to break down and replace stereotypes of the hillbilly, which appeared in cartoons, on radio, and on television shows. Scholar activists also borrowed from new theories about imperialism and colonialism, especially the “internal colonialism model,” which explained poverty through a history of land and labor exploitation and the concentration of wealth in the hands of outsider capitalists. Rather than attempting solely to solve the problems of poverty, scholar activists examined enormous structural issues in the capitalist system and charged that poverty in Appalachia was an effect of the unequal distribution of power and resources.²⁴⁸

Claiming Appalachian as an identity was in part about dispelling the “hillbilly” stereotype, replacing the image of a mountaineer stuck in old ways with mountain activists, those who celebrated traditional cultures at the same time that they were forward-looking and politically progressive. The identity reflected the 1960s emphasis on social justice, building on

²⁴⁷ Appalachian Studies conference, 1970, Clinch Valley College, Box 102, Folder 12, Highlander Records. See also the publication that came out of one of the early Appalachian Studies conferences, *Colonialism in Modern America*.

²⁴⁸ Appalachian Studies conference, 1970.

the coalitional work of the Poor People's Campaign and adopting language of self-determination and justice. When they claimed the identity "Appalachian," activists also entered into a conversation about their "rights" as Appalachian people, white and black. They were no longer fighting solely to defeat poverty, but to make a series of demands of the government to redress the injustices and iniquities that kept them from experiencing the fullness of American citizenship.

The March for Survival

In 1971, three years after the Poor People's Campaign, Appalachian activists returned to the Hawthorne School, where they had met with Mexican-American, Native American, and African American groups as part of the poor people's movement. Carrying the lessons of the Poor People's Campaign forward, a diverse regional movement of Appalachians went to Washington to demand strong social programs to serve poor and disabled people and single mothers. The Appalachian group's policy focus was on the revised version of Nixon's Family Assistance Plan (FAP), HR1. The March for Survival was part of a wave of protests led and influenced by the National Welfare Rights Organization. In the spring of 1970 NWRO had organized rallies in D.C., lobbied for an improved FAP, and held a sit-in at the office of Robert Finch, secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). In early 1971 the Senate Committee introduced HR1, a revised version of FAP that in many ways was less generous than the original plan, potentially leading to less money for families, eliminating food stamps, and requiring mothers with pre-school age children to register for work. The NWRO renamed the plan the "Family Annihilation Plan" and lobbied to defeat the bill, not just reform it. They requested that groups across the country meet with and write letters to representatives and

explain their problems with the legislation. The Appalachian group did exactly that, meeting with representatives of the Appalachian Regional Commission as well as House representatives and HEW officials.²⁴⁹ But they also had other goals in mind. Along with identifying as welfare recipients, they also identified as Appalachians and organized meetings in D.C. to campaign on issues facing poor people in Appalachia. The title of their march, “The Appalachian March for Survival Against Unfulfilled Promises,” suggested that they were weary of politicians, from the local to national level, promising to bring about change in the mountains only to “shortchange Appalachian people” and “do it all with a smile saying how good things are going.”²⁵⁰

The march was organized by welfare rights activists from eastern Kentucky and West Virginia, as well as staff from the Council of the Southern Mountains and the Highlander Center. In the planning stage for the march, the National Welfare Rights Organization was in contact with the activists and offered assistance. The group requested that NWRO help them set up meetings in D.C. and locate housing. The NWRO also sent materials about their ongoing lobbying efforts to establish a guaranteed minimum income for poor families. The planning group decided to reach out to the Black Lung Association as well, since the struggle for miner’s welfare was in many ways related to the fight for a minimum income. Arnold Miller, the future president of the UMWA, agreed to send out mailings to the Black Lung Association and to set up meetings about miners’ welfare.²⁵¹

The more than 300 member march was made up of welfare mothers and welfare rights activists, retired miners with black lung disease and miners’ wives and widows, and younger

²⁴⁹ Premilla Nadasen, *Rethinking the Welfare Rights Movement*, 79-81; 84-87.

²⁵⁰ “Survival March, Information Packet,” Box 96, Folder 7, CSM Records II.

²⁵¹ “Report from March Planning Committee,” September 1971, Highlander Center, and “The Appalachian Welfare March,” Box 96, Folder 7, CSM Records II.

activists associated with Highlander and the Council of the Southern Mountains. Welfare mothers and disabled miners had much in common: they depended on a strong social safety net for basic life needs, but they also often felt invisible. Members of the coalition forced politicians to see them and challenged them to construct policies that would change their conditions.²⁵²

The first meeting on the group's agenda was with the Appalachian Regional Commission. Images from the event show a packed room, with officials around a table and activists sitting around the wall and standing around the table. The group of about one hundred activists started by singing "Amazing Grace." Activists queried the Commission officials about what they were doing for the poor people of Appalachia and what had they done in the six years since the Commission's founding. As one official praised the Commission's effort to build new highways in the mountains, a West Virginia woman pounced. "Hold the phone a minute," she interrupted. She noted that the roads in her community were in poor condition, adding, "Besides, we can't eat nary a damned highway." Since its inception, the Commission had focused on infrastructure development, with the goal of modernizing the transportation system and attracting industry to the region. But to the welfare and black lung activists, the Commission was not doing enough to address the needs of ordinary people. Over the course of the meeting welfare recipients challenged Commissioners to stand up for the needs of poor people and push for better welfare programs. Representatives from the Black Lung Association called for more secure benefits for sick miners and their families as well as federal oversight of black lung legislation to force companies to comply.²⁵³

One of the most passionate speeches was given by Billie Jean Johnson, an African

²⁵² *Mountain Life & Work* devoted sections of several issues to the March for Survival, September/October 1971 and November 1971.

²⁵³ *Mountain Life and Work*, November 1971; "Washington March," *Mountain Eagle*, November 11, 1971.

American mother and welfare recipient from West Virginia, who also confronted the Commission for focusing too much on constructing new highways and not enough on basic needs. Johnson stated, “I like roads...but I want to be full when I walk on the highway.” As Johnson continued she became more passionate and described the desperate conditions facing her and other mothers: “People are going hungry. I’m not telling you what I heard about. I’m telling you what’s going on in my neighborhood, going on in my county, what’s going on in my community.” She also disapproved of Nixon’s welfare reform policy, arguing that it would force stay-at-home mothers to go to work. She shared the story of a woman in her neighborhood who had six children and needed welfare to support them, but who would have a difficult time finding employment: “What’s she going to do with them kids [if she goes to work]?” As she wrapped up her speech, she sought to dispel stereotypes of welfare mothers unwilling or too lazy to work. She raised the issue of childcare—how were women to raise children and go to work?—but she also pointed out that there were no jobs to be had. She asserted, “We want jobs. Us young women, we want something to do.”²⁵⁴

Following their meeting with the Appalachian Regional Commission, the activists headed to a scheduled meeting with HEW officials. They soon noticed that very few officials were present and that they were “just talking to ourselves.” Eula Hall, who represented the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization, suggested that the activists go to the offices of HEW Secretary Elliot Richardson and demand that he and other officials attend the meeting. She then declared, “Let’s stay here until we’re heard.” She and over seventy activists took elevators to Richardson’s office and remained until Richardson and several other officials finally agreed to attend a meeting. Upon arrival, Richardson stated, “Tell us what you think we ought to be doing.

²⁵⁴ *Mountain Life & Work*, November 1971.

We're not going to be able to do everything, but we do want to know."²⁵⁵

Appalachian activists favored a guaranteed minimum income for single- and two-parent poor families, but like welfare rights activists across the country, they argued that the minimum was much too low. They also objected to the job requirements, noting that many welfare recipients would be forced to take jobs at hourly rates as low as \$1.20 an hour. Moreover, the plan failed to recognize mothers' caregiving labor as a "job" and it did nothing to address the dearth of jobs for women in Appalachia. Finally, they took issue with the elimination of food stamps in HR1, which meant that families on the plan would be receiving even less money than outlined in the original FAP, which had included around \$800 in food stamps for a family of four. Many activists in Appalachia had fought for more wide-spread and efficient food stamp programs in the preceding years; they knew the difference the program made in people's lives; and they were not going to give it up easily.²⁵⁶

Along with the plight of mothers, the activists put a spotlight on the conditions of miners disabled by black lung disease. At each of the D.C. meetings, representatives from the Black Lung Association spoke about the need for health care provisions and welfare benefits for miners who suffered from the respiratory disease. The Black Lung Association had begun in the late 1960s as progressive doctors, antipoverty workers, and disabled miners began setting up county chapters to address the need for a legislative agenda that would lead to compensation for sick miners. They had successfully lobbied for the Coal Mine Health and Safety Act, which included a section on a temporary black lung benefits program. By the time of the March for Survival, miners were involved in a full-fledged campaign to reform black lung benefits at the federal

²⁵⁵ "Survival March, Information Packet"; Leonard Pardue, "HEW Chief Hears Appalachian Marchers," *Courier-Journal*, November 9, 1971.

²⁵⁶ Leonard Pardue, "HEW Chief Hears Appalachian Marchers."

level. They wanted claims processed more quickly and they fought for “claimants’ rights” to impartial examinations and explanations when they were denied claims.²⁵⁷

The association issued thirteen demands, from an expansion of medical services and benefits for people who suffered from black lung, to greater oversight of mining companies and assurances that widows and dependents of miners would also be eligible for black lung benefits. Most powerfully, miners who suffered from the disease spoke directly to the formerly “faceless bureaucrats.” At the HEW meeting with Secretary Richardson, James Hamilton, a 77-year old disabled, retired miner testified that he had been a coal miner for forty-seven years until he had to retire because of black lung disease. When he retired he “went through all kinds of hell before getting help from the government.”²⁵⁸

Overall, however, the march had a limited impact on federal policies. Among the small victories, mothers from West Virginia successfully campaigned for oversight of state welfare policy. They complained to HEW officials that the welfare department in West Virginia had threatened to terminate automatically welfare assistance after a six-month period. Federal policy stated that assistance should be provided to eligible individuals until they were found to be ineligible. West Virginia officials were putting the onus on recipients to prove their eligibility every six months, which struck many as punitive and unnecessary. HEW officials responded to the complaints by contacting West Virginia officials and requesting that it be revised so that it was consistent with federal policy.²⁵⁹ In October 1972, the Family Assistance Plan was voted down by Senate conservatives, but a more generous welfare package did not replace it. The

²⁵⁷ Barbara Ellen Smith, *Digging Our Own Graves: Coal Miners and the Struggle Over Black Lung Disease* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 119-127, 168-171, 173.

²⁵⁸ “Eyeing Faceless Bureaucrats,” Washington, D.C. *The Evening Star*, November 9, 1971.

²⁵⁹ *Mountain Life and Work*, November 1971.

NWRO had hoped to help write a new piece of legislation, but by 1972 the political tides had turned and they were not able to build momentum for the effort. Appalachian welfare activists, like their counterparts across the nation, continued to look for other ways to strengthen social welfare programs in their own states and communities.²⁶⁰

Ultimately they would focus on campaigning for single issues. For instance, the year following the march, the Black Lung Association celebrated the passage of the Black Lung Benefits Act of 1972, considered a “clear-cut political victory for the black lung movement.”²⁶¹ But for black lung benefits and treatments to be effective, Appalachian communities needed more access to health clinics and medical providers responsive to their needs. Eula Hall and the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization brought a concern for community health to the OEO during the March for Survival, arguing that they needed community health clinics that could serve miners and the broader community of poor people who often did not have access to medical services. At the march, welfare rights activists had met with OEO officials in the hopes of reforming a pilot comprehensive community health program in Floyd County which had proven to be ineffective. That effort inspired local activists to take matters into their own hands and design a model community health project and eventually a clinic that served the needs of poor people, especially disabled miners and welfare recipients.

Between 1967 and 1971 poor people’s groups forged a welfare rights movement in which they drew on a rights-based model and promoted an inclusive definition of welfare, one that allowed for a loose but significant interracial and mixed-sex coalition. Black and white mothers,

²⁶⁰ Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 158-159.

²⁶¹ Barbara Ellen Smith, *Digging Our Own Graves*, 119-127, 168-171, 173.

wives of chronically unemployed men, widows and disabled miners picked up the mantle of welfare rights and found common ground to make their case for social citizenship. All of these groups challenged the idea of welfare dependency, knowing that public assistance programs carried a social stigma that followed all of the recipients, despite their individual experiences. Regardless of their underlying assumptions, the strongest claim made by welfare recipients was that welfare—in the broadest sense—was a right of all citizens. They recast debates about welfare to show how their individual plights were the effects of structural forces, not personal moral failings. Driven by these beliefs, welfare recipients in Appalachia joined the social upheavals of the late 1960s and advanced participatory democracy, building coalitions and demanding that politicians at all levels of government recognize the political demands of poor people.

CHAPTER FOUR

Community Organizing in Eastern Kentucky

The Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization (EKWRO) grew out of the 979 Community Action Council, which had formed in 1966 in Floyd County, Kentucky, with War on Poverty funding. In 1969, the welfare rights group filed for and received incorporation as a non-profit and adopted a constitution. Its stated purpose was to work toward an “adequate income for its members and all Americans.” Their guiding principle was that “the fruits of a man’s work should be his to enjoy, but wealth created by the resources of this great country should be directed to give an adequate income to all its citizens.” The group appealed to the sense of many poor people in Appalachia that they were poor because of corporate domination of the land, stating that “We believe people are poor because in this generation or in the generation past, they have been denied equal opportunity. In Floyd County and Eastern Kentucky this happened when coal companies bought the land and mineral rights for as low as 50 cents an acre eventhough [sic] they knew the true value. The results of this exist to the present day.”²⁶²

Drawing on the internal colonial model, which had gained prominence at scholar-activist conferences and in regional and local publications, and referring to the mining tradition in Appalachia, the EKWRO analyzed the relationship between coal companies and mining families. The group’s constitution offered an idea about how to correct the “injustice” of the past: “to give adequate income, education, and health to Americans who’s kin have died protecting the country and [whose] men have given their health and lives for the growth of the industrial might of this

²⁶² “Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization Constitution and By-Laws,” Box 46, Folder 14, AV Records.

nation.” The Constitution blended a sense that poverty was unforgivable in a resource-rich nation with a patriotic call to support the families who had sacrificed their men and boys in the mines and in wars. While more well-known welfare rights groups, in urban areas and made up of black women, focused on racial discrimination in housing and welfare policies, the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization and other majority poor-white groups focused on a history of exploitation by coal companies and how political machines in coal towns controlled who got welfare assistance. The constitution was firmly rooted in a masculine ideal: because men supported their families and protected their countries they were entitled to a set of benefits, garnered through both the public and private sectors.²⁶³

At the same time, the constitution outlined the humiliation faced by welfare recipients when applying for benefits and called for “a voice in the decisions” that affect poor people. In this way, the organization provided a message that both men and women could rally around. Single mothers on welfare may have lost any hope that a miner-husband could provide for them and their children, but they knew that too often the odds were stacked against them at the welfare office, and local welfare rights organization provided legal advice and advocacy to help navigate the system.²⁶⁴

The Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization was the most active and long-lasting of the Appalachian welfare rights groups. More than any other, it brought together the various struggles in Appalachia—school lunch campaigns, health concerns, strip-mining, inadequate public assistance, and lack of political power—and articulated a vision of welfare that was rooted in concepts of interdependence and community. Reflecting on the organization’s role in the community decades later, Eula Hall stated, “We wanted to organize, just like a union. We

²⁶³ See Robyn Muncy, “Coal Fired Reforms.”

²⁶⁴ “Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization Constitution and By-Laws,” Box 46, Folder 14, AV Records.

wanted to have our own body, own unity so we could deal with problems we was faced with. And you know we were stronger in groups than we were as individuals.”²⁶⁵

The Eastern Kentucky group was a mixed-sex welfare rights organization at a time when welfare was associated with women. As in the National Welfare Rights Organization, middle-class, educated men provided guidance, working as community organizers, lawyers, and lay advocates. The organization also attracted a cadre of local men who became outspoken advocates for particular welfare issues. The War on Poverty had focused primarily on the position of male breadwinners, and the male organizers of the group entered into these debates, seeking to uplift families by garnering public aid for disabled and unemployed miners. As was the case in many mixed-sex community organizations, men staffed the organization, making up its paid and official positions, while women were the organizing backbone.

Within several years of the group’s founding, however, women became the faces and voices of the organization, and they connected its goals to their positions as mothers and caregivers, not only in the nuclear family but as members of caring communities. They joined a campaign for a school lunch program and garnered support for a community health clinic that would ease the burdens of wives and mothers charged with caring for the sick, elderly, and young. As women organized among friends and neighbors and then asserted themselves as leaders, the group addressed more directly the needs of poor families and built alliances with women in nearby communities. While at first they used gender-neutral language, as women became more vocal they discussed women’s distinct forms of oppression in Appalachia. They continued to work in mixed-sex organizations and coalitions, but their experiences of welfare and poverty would prove effective means of organizing compelling campaigns, as mothers brought to them an ethic of caregiving and interdependency.

²⁶⁵ Eula Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad.

The Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization started as a small network of welfare recipients who had worked with the Appalachian Volunteers to inform people in the community about how to sign up for public assistance. Local and outsider men were Appalachian Volunteer staff or sat on the board of the 979 Community Action Council, the organizations that fostered early welfare organizing.²⁶⁶ For instance, Herschell “Nick” Frasure, formerly a barber, joined the Appalachian Volunteers as a Summer Assistant in 1967 and continued to work with the organization until it folded in 1969. His last title was as staff on the “Welfare Rights Project.”²⁶⁷ We know tantalizing little about the personal motivations of Frasure or men like him who tackled the issue of welfare, but very likely one motivating factor was that many men in eastern Kentucky were facing lay-offs, permanent disability from working in the mines, or long periods of unemployment. Public assistance, in the form of food stamps, Social Security, or unemployment compensation, must have seemed like good options to stabilize a household.²⁶⁸

We know just as little about the women who were involved in those early efforts to organize welfare recipients in Floyd County. In neighboring Harlan and Pike Counties local women led the charge to organize welfare recipients; they were the paid community organizers and the people in attendance at meetings. In Floyd County, women did not hold paid staff

²⁶⁶ “979 Community Action Council Summary,” “Poverty: Community Action Council,” Vertical Files, Southern Appalachian Archives, Berea College.

²⁶⁷ Staff chart, by Jeanette Knowles, in author’s possession.

²⁶⁸ In December 1968, Nick Frasure wrote a column for the *Appalachian Lookout* describing his recent activities in Floyd County, Kentucky. He discussed a campaign to pressure the Kentucky Public Assistance Department to send a food stamp worker to the Highway 979 community once a week to pick up applications. The goal was to ease the burdens on food stamp recipients, some of whom had to travel forty miles one way to reach the office in the county seat. Frasure described the outcomes: the committee convinced officials to keep the offices open an hour longer and to consider sending a worker to the community on a regular basis. He concluded that “the most important thing was that people worked together as an organization” and “realized their problem could be solved.” See “Mud Creek to Frankfort,” *Appalachian Lookout*, December 1968, December 1968, Box 20, Folder 4, AV Records.

persons in the first several years. But evidence suggests that their informal networks provided the basis for a successful organization. Young local women knocked on doors, spread news about current campaigns, and surveyed women about the most pressing issues they faced.²⁶⁹

Community organizers recall that women were some of the most vocal and vibrant attendees at meetings to discuss welfare rights.²⁷⁰ Women were also involved in lay advocacy. Eula Hall remembers that once she began working with antipoverty programs, she had access to resources and knowledge that could help her secure welfare for poor people. She drove people to the AFDC, food stamp, and Social Security offices, where she advocated on their behalf. From her own experience of being on and off welfare when her husband was hospitalized for mental illness, to her husband qualifying for disability compensation from the Social Security office, Hall knew that accessing aid often became a political game. The more knowledge you had about the system, the better the chances that you would receive assistance.²⁷¹

To have a broad reach, the welfare rights group depended on informal female organizers, who had better access to local women than men. Eula Hall recalls that women would say things to her that they would not discuss with a man; they would not even broach certain subjects if a man was in the room. When she was alone with them they would “open up and talk.” Hall knew how to navigate gender relations, and she could also relate to women. She “lived their lives,” and she understood what it was like to “need food stamps” or “rock sick babies to sleep.”²⁷²

A cadre of outsider activists volunteered alongside locals to help make the welfare rights group a powerful force in Floyd County. Hank Zingg, the Outpost Director for the Appalachian

²⁶⁹ Vivian Keathley, phone conversation with author, March 2012.

²⁷⁰ Kathy Rivel, interview with author, June 5, 2012.

²⁷¹ Hall, interview with author, September 2012.

²⁷² Hall, interview with author, March 2012.

Volunteers in Floyd County, had been working in the community since 1967 and was behind putting its resources toward welfare rights organizing. His wife Jo Crockett Zingg was employed in the county welfare office, where she helped single mothers sign up for AFDC. She recalls meeting women whose husbands had abandoned them or had left them to go North in search of work, often with little luck. She began to see how “badly women were treated in the system.” While Jo worked in the office and saw first-hand how women experienced the system, Hank began to work with local men and women to organize around welfare rights in Floyd County. In 1968 Hank and the Appalachian Volunteer staff helped more than fifty people secure benefits, and they trained people to understand how the welfare system worked and how to distribute “dependable information so that families do not get their hopes up only to have them dashed.” This organizational base provided a foundation for what would become the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization.²⁷³

As welfare recipients were beginning to organize, a new group of VISTAs arrived in Floyd County to work for the 979 Community Action Council. Steve Brooks was among the volunteers assigned to Floyd County, and he became a key ally in the struggle for welfare rights. Brooks’ path to the VISTA program began when he was in college at Ohio University, where he became part of the student anti-war movement. Brooks’ developing political consciousness led him to community organizing in inner-city Cleveland. In 1968, he dropped out of college and was accepted into VISTA. At the training in Baltimore, he received a crash course in community organizing, learned about social movement theorist Saul Alinsky, and heard about the growing movement of poor people in eastern Kentucky.²⁷⁴

²⁷³ Floyd County Report by Tom Hamilton, Hank Zingg, and Nick Frasure, in “AV Activity Reports,” Box 9, Folder 2, AV Records.

²⁷⁴ Steve Brooks, interview with author, November 18, 2013.

In the fall of 1968 Brooks moved to Mud Creek in Floyd County, Kentucky, along with four other volunteers. Brooks recalls that he and the other VISTAs were told to avoid involvement with the Appalachian Volunteers, who had recently earned a reputation as radicals for organizing against strip-mining. They arrived in Floyd County after the sedition arrests in Pike County and around the time of the Kentucky Un-American Activity Committee (KUAC) hearings that helped to undermine the work of the Appalachian Volunteers. The director of the Big Sandy Community Action Program had discontinued any support of the organization, and the Floyd County CAP passed a resolution “opposing the activities of the Appalachian Volunteers and further requesting the proper authorities to remove said Appalachian Volunteers from the state of Kentucky and from Floyd County, Kentucky in particular.”²⁷⁵ VISTA guidelines instructed volunteers that they were not to engage in politically-motivated campaigns.

At the time of the volunteers’ arrival, the 979 community action council in Floyd County was working to bring a water system to the community, to repair bridges, and to start a new garbage collection program. The volunteers went house to house soliciting easements for the water line. While Brooks and his peers initially took part in that process, they soon became interested in the nascent welfare rights organizing on Mud Creek. Before long they decided that they wanted to contribute to community organizing and to begin to address the power imbalance in the region. Welfare rights seemed like the best way to do that. Brooks recalls that the VISTAs met with community action board members and talked to them about working with welfare rights organizers associated with the Appalachian Volunteers, which had not yet folded. While some members were averse at first, they eventually supported the VISTAs. With the help of VISTA organizers, the welfare rights group grew. The volunteers had government vehicles that they

²⁷⁵ “Floyd CAP Opposes AV Activity,” *The Hawkeye*, April 22, 1968. During the KUAC hearings, Harry Eastburn testified against Appalachian Volunteer activities. See “KUAC File,” *Appalachian Lookout*, December 1968.

used to transport people to the welfare office, and they also received training as lay advocates so that they could represent members at benefit hearings.²⁷⁶

In 1969 Steve Brooks helped to build a bridge between local and state struggles and the National Welfare Rights Organization. After receiving approval from the state VISTA director, Brooks worked on connecting welfare recipients, legal aid lawyers, and VISTA workers to form a state-wide welfare rights coalition, the Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization. As director he networked with the NWRO to learn about upcoming national campaigns, with the idea that welfare campaigns would be coordinated between the local, state, and national levels.²⁷⁷

The local welfare rights movement was also boosted by lawyer Howard Thorkelson, who provided training to VISTAs as well as community people so that they could serve as lay advocates at welfare hearings. Born and raised in California, Thorkelson's commitment to justice developed in part due to the struggles he experienced as a person with disabilities. He had contracted polio as a child and was left partially paralyzed in his arms. After graduating from Yale Law School in 1965, Thorkelson took a position at the Center for Social Welfare Policy and Law, affiliated with the Columbia School of Social Work. His work at the Center positioned Thorkelson at the forefront of legal challenges based on welfare rights.²⁷⁸

The Center for Social Welfare Policy was founded by labor lawyer Edward V. Sparer, and one of its primary goals was to offer legal aid, not as a charity but as a fundamental right. Sparer's first hire at the center was Howard Thorkelson. The welfare system was a key area in which Sparer and his associates tested theories that poor people had rights to legal resources and counsel. Under the mentorship of Sparer, Thorkelson's interest in poverty, welfare, and legal

²⁷⁶ Brooks, interview with author; "Welfare Rights," *The Hawkeye*, May 1, 1969.

²⁷⁷ Brooks, interview with the author.

²⁷⁸ Howard Thorkelson, interview by Jo Crockett Zingg.

rights grew. He began traveling to the South to work on civil rights cases, where he encountered the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the ACLU's Lawyer Constitutional Defense Committee. He spent a summer working full time on civil rights cases in Selma, Alabama, with lawyer Don Jelinek. Sparer had convinced Jelinek to develop class action litigation regarding welfare regulations that terminated aid to poor children and their single mothers if the mother had a boyfriend. These regulations disproportionately affected African American women. *King v. Smith* (1968) successfully struck down so-called "man in the house" rules on the basis that a parent had a legal obligation to care for a child, while a boyfriend did not. Thus the fact of a mother having a boyfriend did not negate a woman's need for welfare to support children. These experiences laid the foundations for Thorkelson's work in eastern Kentucky.²⁷⁹

After three years working for Sparer and the Center for Social Welfare Policy and Law, Thorkelson decided to move in a new direction following Sparer's announcement that he was leaving the center. Thorkelson met an Appalachian Volunteer who was on vacation in New York, and he learned that the AVs were in need of a legal team. He soon contacted the AV's director Milton Ogle, who offered him a position in eastern Kentucky. In 1968 Thorkelson moved to Prestonsburg, Kentucky, in Floyd County. There he drew on his experiences in Alabama to develop a legal aid program in conjunction with the Appalachian Volunteers.²⁸⁰

When Thorkelson arrived in eastern Kentucky, the AVs were already beginning to recruit young lawyers who were interested in civil rights, mainly from the Law Students Civil Rights Research Council. Programs such as these were inundated by requests by young lawyers to be placed in the Deep South, where they could work on some of the most exciting and important

²⁷⁹ See Martha F. Davis, *Brutal Need: Lawyers and the Welfare Rights Movement* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993); Thorkelson, interview by Zingg.

²⁸⁰ Thorkelson, interview by Zingg.

civil rights cases of their time. Between 1967 and 1969, the Director of Field Operations of the AVs began requesting that the Council direct students to Appalachia, “an ideal training ground for lawyers and their skills are desperately needed if our hopes to affect change in the political and economic system are to be realized.” While the Council seemed eager to route students to volunteer programs, the future lawyers were not always keen on being placed in Appalachia rather than the Deep South. In the first summer of the program in 1968, two students did not show up and others were less than pleased with the rural area assigned to them and left before their assignments were completed.²⁸¹

Thorkelson helped to remedy the retention problem by hand-selecting law students who had shown an interest in the Appalachian region. In 1969, he requested fifteen student interns from the Council. Their duties included representing defendants in civil and criminal cases; instructing community people on lay advocacy; and, most important, addressing the machine politics of some Appalachian towns by conducting a survey to make sense of and begin to address the “highly personal” procedures in the magistrates’ courts, which often ignored formal rules of practice.²⁸² Overall, the main goal of the AV legal team was to raise consciousness about poor people’s legal rights, through the courts and through education.

One of the biggest challenges the legal team faced was countering the isolation that “head-of-the-hollow” people, those in the most rural areas of Appalachian counties, experienced in relation to “the law” in the county seats. A report on the role of law students in the AV program argued that “many individuals in Appalachia do not know their legal rights. Many think

²⁸¹ Thomas Rhodenbaugh to William L. Robinson of the Law Students Civil Rights Research Council, Box 51, Folder 5, AV Records; Howard Thorkelson to Richard L. Huffman, January 24, 1969, Box 51, Folder 5, AV Records.

²⁸² “Role of Law Students in AV Program: Appraisal and Recommendations,” Box 51, Folder 4, AV Records.

they have greater measures of some rights (such as public assistance) than they actually have. Others know of only a few of their rights.” The consequence was that individuals were forced to make “sense out of the rumors and snatches of ‘law’ that they have heard,” usually leading them to conclusions about their legal rights that were vaguely similar to the actual law but ultimately incorrect.²⁸³ The lawyers trained volunteers and local people about the welfare system and how to make appeals, and they served as lay advocates to the broader community.

Organizers also helped to distribute information about welfare in Kentucky through the booklet, “What is Welfare?” developed by an Appalachian Volunteer. The community-run Hawkeye Press in Floyd County printed the booklet, and the AV office distributed more than five hundred copies to welfare rights and antipoverty organizations across the state and nation. For instance, Tim Sampson of the Poverty/Rights Action Center in Washington, D.C. requested fifty copies for his office. After receiving a first set of booklets from the Appalachian Volunteers, a VISTA who was working with a welfare rights group in Louisville, Kentucky, requested twenty more copies, stating that she wished to distribute them to “various people who have a lot of contact with welfare recipients.”²⁸⁴

The handbook provided a comprehensive history of welfare in the United States, and it offered an overview of the welfare system in Kentucky. “Who needs welfare?” the authors asked. “The people who need help with their welfare are those who can’t provide the basic necessities of life for themselves and their families.” The booklet offered an argument about why particular people needed welfare, focusing in particular on “families without fathers” and “unemployed men.” The authors pointed out the difficulties that mothers faced if men were killed by accidents, sickness, or war. They continued, “Sometimes fathers leave home and won’t

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Letters to Milton Ogle, July 22, 1968, and Distribution List, Box 63, Folder 9, AV Records.

take care of their families. Can these mothers take care of the families' needs? If they go to work, what about the children? Isn't it right for a mother to stay home and take care of her children?"

The booklet also made an argument for unemployed men receiving aid. "People who can't find jobs also need help," the authors argued. Lastly, the authors discussed the problems facing the working poor: "They work hard all day but still don't make enough money to live decently."

Along with identifying the types of people who might qualify, the booklet provided step-by-step instructions about how to apply for welfare benefits and how to appeal if denied.²⁸⁵

Throughout 1968 and 1969, Floyd County activists educated the public about welfare laws, connected with a state-wide movement to make the system fairer, and assisted individuals who needed to sign up for benefits. By 1970 the organization had garnered 150 dues paying members.²⁸⁶ With networks in place, the EKWRO began a public campaign to address one of the primary concerns of poor families: how to keep children in school. Families identified school lunches and textbooks as key issues; if poor students could not eat at school or if they did not receive textbooks, they were more likely to drop out.

The Floyd County School Lunch Campaign

In the summer and fall of 1969, the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization began petitioning the local school board for a more effective and fair school lunch program. In August 1969 Linda Hamilton of Floyd County wrote a letter to Rep. Carl D. Perkins, explaining why she and a group of local people and activists had begun the campaign. She described a scene in which "poor children [have] to set on the stage and watch the other ones eat their dinner" and

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Steve Brooks to Julian Mosley, January 8, 1970, Box 49, Folder 50, CSM Records II.

how “all left overs was thrown out to the hogs instead of giving it to the poor hung[ry] kids who didn’t have anything.” She described how local officials refused to talk to the school lunch committee. Hamilton then put the campaign into a broader context, stating that she knew “the government can’t feed all kids” but that she and others in Floyd County were asking for a little help for poor people who “work for what they get” but still did not have enough to eat.²⁸⁷

Hamilton was among the community members and parents who joined EKWRO in pressuring the Floyd County Board of Education to make publicly available guidelines for free and reduced school lunches and to treat children from impoverished families with dignity. Their campaign reflected the group’s belief that poor people were in need of more than charity. They wanted a voice in local decision-making. A part of a nationwide groundswell of activism to reform the National School Lunch Program, rife with racial and class discrimination, they campaigned to ensure that federal dollars translated into meals for children. Drawing from the civil rights movement and the renewed focus on poverty in the United States, activists at the grassroots hoped to rectify the failure of the school lunch program to reach all poor children, mounting “right to lunch” campaigns throughout the nation in the late 1960s.²⁸⁸

The idea of school lunches had been in the media spotlight since the beginning of the War on Poverty. For instance, in a 1965 film on President Johnson’s “poverty tour,” Lady Bird Johnson joined a group of Appalachian school children at their one-room schoolhouse for a hot lunch. “Hot lunches”—as opposed to pales of cold biscuits and gravy or, worse, nothing—

²⁸⁷ Linda L. Hamilton to Carl Perkins, Aug. 7, 1969, Box 46, Folder 14, AV Records.

²⁸⁸ For a comprehensive history of the National School Lunch Program and the variety of groups who campaigned for an improved program, see Susan Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America’s Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). For contemporary studies on hunger and the need for school lunches, see Committee on School Lunch Participation, *Their Daily Bread: A Study of the National School Lunch Program* (Atlanta: McNelly-Rudd, 1968) and Citizens’ Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States, *Hunger, U.S.A: A Report*.

became a rallying cry in the early years of the War on Poverty. The issue was easy to get behind. U.S. citizens could surely see the benefit of federal dollars purchasing cafeteria equipment for impoverished schools.²⁸⁹ Yet, as historian Susan Levine shows, since its inception the school lunch program had “enjoyed widespread support but fed relatively few children.”²⁹⁰ With attention on racial inequality and poverty in the 1960s, civil rights, antipoverty workers, and physicians scrutinized the program. Under pressure to feed the nation’s poor children, the Department of Agriculture, which oversaw the program, began to push for federal appropriations for free lunches.²⁹¹

In 1966 President Johnson signed the Child Nutrition Act. The legislation expanded and strengthened the National School Lunch Program established in the 1940s, providing grants-in-aid to states so that they could fund free lunch programs in low-income areas. It also established pilot breakfast and milk programs for poor children. But there was a problem. The Act relied on good-faith efforts of state and local officials to extend the child nutrition programs to poor and racial minorities, and in 1968 “at least six and half million poor children, mostly in cities and isolated rural areas, still had no access to free lunches.”²⁹² Local officials needed a push from the people they were supposed to serve.²⁹³

In 1969 the National Welfare Rights Organization began a nation-wide campaign to accelerate the pace of change, organizing poor people and welfare recipients to demand better

²⁸⁹ “LBJ Wraps up His Poverty Tour of the Appalachian States,” Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/lbjforkids/pov_media.shtm.

²⁹⁰ Levine, *School Lunch Politics*, 105.

²⁹¹ Ibid, 113.

²⁹² Ibid, 128.

²⁹³ Ibid, 113-116, and Gordon W. Gunderson, “National School Lunch Program, Child Nutrition Act,” http://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp/history_6#child, accessed 26 November 2013.

welfare and food assistance programs. One of their major direct action campaigns was for free school lunches for poor children. Free lunches offered relief to parents who often did not have enough food stamps to feed a family for an entire month, and they could substantially improve children's health. At the Kennedy hunger hearings a year earlier, Dr. Doane Fisher of Harlan County made exactly this point. He discussed how poor children who had access to meals at school fared better than children without. He noted that cases of anemia, one of the signature problems in children suffering from malnutrition, dropped once children were able to attend a state-supported day care center where they received regular meals. Fisher praised the programs and offered evidence that food and medical programs for poor families significantly improved the health of children. It was this logic that drove both the NWRO and local food activists in eastern Kentucky: food programs for children in day cares and public schools eased some of the burdens on impoverished families.²⁹⁴

The NWRO distributed the pamphlet "School Lunch Program Bill of Rights" on how to organize community campaigns to force local school boards to abide by federal law and provide lunches to school children. The pamphlet built upon the bill of rights for welfare recipients in general, as outlined by welfare rights lawyer Edward Sparer. The original bill of rights responded to the legal issues and infringements on civil liberties that welfare recipients faced, including punitive work policies, illegal searches, and residency laws. Sparer and his team of lawyers challenged state statutes meant to control welfare recipients. In the school lunch campaigns, the

²⁹⁴ "Transcript of Evidence, Hearing Held at Fleming-Neon, Kentucky," Field Hearings—Eastern Kentucky, U.S.S. Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty.

NWRO was not attempting to change laws (as was often the case with welfare programs), but was seeking to make local school boards abide by federal law already in existence.²⁹⁵

NWRO activists informed communities about federal legislation on school lunches and their rights to request information about how funding was distributed and how school boards intended to use funding slated for food. The bill of rights called for nutritious lunches for all children, even those who could not afford to pay, and that they should receive those meals without regard to race, class, or religion. The document also laid out the rights of parents, who could request and receive information about school lunch programs in their school district; appeal denials for free or reduced lunch; and form or join a welfare rights organization to enforce school lunch programs. The bill of rights informed parents about how to hold public hearings and demonstrations, bring law suits against school boards, and contact state and federal officials when local school boards failed to follow the contract with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.²⁹⁶

Drawing from NWRO guidelines, EKWRO jumped into a nationwide debate about the responsibility of local and state governments to subsidize school children's meals. They focused their efforts on the John M. Stumbo Elementary School, which served families along the 979 Highway in Floyd County, where school administrators had failed to implement a robust school lunch program despite a large population of children from low-income families. School Boards and administrators decided how federal grants, distributed by the state, could be applied in school districts, and poor people had a sense that grants were often not used to ease the burdens

²⁹⁵ Levine, 143; EKWRO Publications echo the School Lunch Bill of Rights. See "EKWRO Denied Access to School Lunch Regulations," *The Hawkeye*, July 15, 1969; "History of the School Lunch Issue," *The Hawkeye*, August 1969. The regional publication *Appalachian Lookout* published federal school lunch programs as well as a chart that explained eligibility in relation to income. See *Appalachian Lookout*, January-February 1969 and April 1969.

²⁹⁶ Levine, 143.

of poor families, as intended. The NWRO's guidelines, along with the networks established through War on Poverty organizations, aided Floyd County parents and activists in designing and implementing their own school lunch campaign.

While the NWRO offered guidance on strategizing campaigns, the journalist Charles Remsberg provided evidence of negligence on the part of school administrators. A year after his award-winning article in *Good Housekeeping*, in which he shed light on hunger in America, Remsberg published an article in the activist-oriented magazine *Impact* on school lunch provisions for poor children in Floyd County. Remsberg argued that despite rigorous guidelines and regulations provided by the Department of Agriculture, school lunch programs too often fell short of the mark "at the lunchroom level, where it really counts." Remsberg reported that 2000 eligible students in Floyd County did not receive free lunches; children unable to afford lunch or bring food from home sometimes had to sit in the same lunchroom where their classmates ate; and sometimes free school lunches were promised in exchange for votes in school board elections.²⁹⁷

Remsberg also charged school administrators with failing to implement federal regulations. Welfare activists told Remsberg that when they provided the Floyd County superintendent Charles Clark with federal regulations, he replied that he could not meet the organizations' "demands" (ignoring that the "demands" were in fact USDA guidelines) and stated that the school lunch program did not have sufficient funds to provide for more children. Remsberg learned that the school had a surplus of funds that the principal explained were going to be used to purchase new kitchen equipment. At the same time, the principal noted that despite the fact that 50 to 60 percent of the student body lived at or below the poverty line, his program

²⁹⁷ "Report Assails East Kentucky School-Lunch 'Failure,'" *The Hawkeye*, July 15, 1969, which includes a summary of Charles Remsberg's *Impact* article and notes that the magazine was published by New Community Press; Letter to Charles Remsberg requesting copies of magazine article, Box 46, Folder 16, AV Records.

could only afford to offer free lunches to a fraction of those who needed it. The principal defended his position, claiming that many of the students actually had the money to pay but did not want to eat. The principal declared, “We can’t force children to eat. That would be violating their constitutional rights.” But Remsberg uncovered a much different story, in which children of poor women and unemployed miners were denied free lunches and parents were told that their children could work for lunches (a violation of federal regulations).²⁹⁸

Of course, none of this was news to the people who worked on local welfare issues. Eula Hall recalled that “We had one of the finest lunchrooms that you could build in a school,” compounding the injustice that some children could not afford to eat. She told stories of children “tantalized” as they sat in the lunch room and watched other children eat, and children sitting separate from the ones who got to eat. She could not afford for her children to buy lunch. The school lunch cost a quarter for most children, and she had four children in school. “That was a dollar a day. I couldn’t come up with a dollar a day better than I could come up with a hundred now,” she said. She was able to give her children a hot breakfast in the morning and to send something with them for lunch. “But a lot of children didn’t [have that]. A lot of little kids did not have breakfast and they wouldn’t have anything to eat until they got home at night.” At the same time, rumors flew in the community about mismanagement of school lunch funds. Cooks and janitors at the school were rumored to haul away “enough food to feed every child in that school.” The principal of the school was said to have a building for sows to breed, and he had “beagle hounds that were as slick as a ribbon.” The principal’s supposed luxuries—plenty of

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

fresh meat and prized hounds—stood in stark contrast to the poverty in the area. “We had starving children in that school,” Hall asserts.²⁹⁹

A school lunch committee representing the EKWRO pressured the School Board and Superintendent Charles Clark for more information about how federal school lunch funds were used in Floyd County and requested guidelines for qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The committee consisted of local men, VISTAs, and a few local women. In July 1969 men on the committee requested a meeting with Mr. Clark. No women were present at this meeting, reflecting the assumption that politics was still largely off-limits to women, especially the rural women who sat on the committee. After keeping the committee waiting for two hours, Clark arrived with two other school board officials who were also truant officers. He remarked “in an excited voice” that until recently, the truant officers were permitted to carry guns. From the head of the table, he then pointed at each of the members of the school committee present and asked them to identify themselves and where they were from, noting who was local and who was not.³⁰⁰

When the committee members were finally able to speak, one requested the written policy of the school lunch program. Clark replied that he could not yet provide the policy and that he would do so when he felt it was ready. According to the school lunch committee, “Clark then went into a long frantic speech, about how the school lunch rooms would go broke if everyone ate free.” He lecture them about “how some students had pride and did not want to eat free, telling about his childhood days in an excited voice, of his clothing of which had patches on top of patches and of how he took biscuits and jelly to school, and he would still love to have an occasional bite of those biscuits and jelly.” He indicted the “outsiders” who he believed were

²⁹⁹ Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad; Hall, interview with author, March 2011.

³⁰⁰ “Meeting with Charles Clark, July 18, 1969,” Box 46, Folder 16, AV Records.

stirring up trouble in Floyd County, and he declared that the VISTAs were “long-haired foreigners” who “were shabby dressed” so that they could “identify themselves with the poor people of the Mud Creek area.” He charged that these so-called foreigners told lies and set groups against one another, and he claimed that at least one of the VISTAs was “probably from Russia.” The school lunch committee attempted to bring the conversation back to the federal lunch program, but Clark kept returning to the topic of outside agitators and refused to speak to members of the school lunch committee who were outsider volunteers.³⁰¹

Despite Clark’s attempts to turn attention away from lunch programs and toward outsider agitators, the welfare rights group continued to press him for information and to develop a savvy campaign to garner support for their cause. They contacted the Department of Agriculture and reported what they believed were abuses by the Floyd County Board of Education, wrote letters to U.S. Congressman Carl D. Perkins, who was a firm supporter of food programs, and continued to hold community meetings to discuss next steps.

But Clark would not budge on releasing information, so on August 7, 1969, between 50 and 70 parents organized a protest at the offices of the Board of Education. Someone had tipped Clark off about the protest, and police and men with baseball bats surrounded the building. A fight started almost immediately between Clark’s supporters and some of the EKWRO men. The scuffle led to a few arrests, and the protest crowd dispersed. But the event brought even more attention to the school lunch issue. As Eula Hall remembers, “We had done our homework. We had the news media there, and all we’d say [was] we want free and reduced lunches for our children. We want our children to eat along with the rest of the children, and the poor kids should eat if the rich kids do, and it embarrassed them to death.” In the aftermath of the protest, Clark

³⁰¹ Ibid.

and the Board of Education continued to put up a fight, filing a restraining order that banned all VISTAs and Appalachian Volunteers (which included several local people), and anyone associated with the groups, from Floyd County school property.³⁰²

In a public meeting a few days after the rally, the school lunch committee, concerned parents, and protesters met to discuss the sequence of events and to make follow-up plans. While men acted as spokespersons for the committee and had direct communications with Clark and other male officials, the transcripts of the meeting reveal the important role women played as both supporters and moral observers. Idie Akers, one of the committee women, reported that she approached Clark, but before she had gotten the words “We’d like to talk to you” out of her mouth, he took a swing at community organizer Palmer Frasure. She then heard a child scream: Clark had missed Frasure and hit the son of one of the protestors. Several more women who were present corroborated Akers’ testimony. Lily Newsome added that Clark warned the protesters that he had forty men inside the building ready to turn away the protesters. Lulabelle Akers testified that everyone at the Board of Education offices had been “real mean, even the women” and that she heard people talking about the outsider VISTAs “as if they weren’t even human.”³⁰³

Howard Thorkelson spoke to the group, assuring them that their actions were lawful and that they had a right to petition the School Board for information to which they were legally entitled. Thorkelson also pointed out that Clark was trying to divert attention from the rights of poor people by attempting to stir up animosity for outsider volunteers. The group ended the

³⁰² Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad; Board of Education declaration that all Floyd County school properties off limits to AVs and VISTAs, July 21, 1969, and Declaration published in the Sandy Valley Shopper, Box 46, Folder 16, AV Records. This declaration followed in the wake of others by the Big Sandy Community Action Program and the Floyd County Community Action Program, which had denounced the Appalachian Volunteers as radicals and subversives during the KUAC hearings. See “AVs as Subversives,” *The Hawkeye*, and “KUAC File,” *Appalachian Lookout*.

³⁰³ Notes from EKWRO emergency meeting, Monday, August 11, 1969, Box 46, Folder 16, AV Records.

meeting by agreeing unanimously to send one more letter to Clark requesting eligibility standards for the school lunch campaign and calling on him to rescind his injunction against VISTA workers. They also vowed to support all local and non-local volunteers, agreeing that the volunteers “had been a help to the community and the community wished to continue to support them.”³⁰⁴

The protests put pressure on Clark to meet with community representatives and an official from the Department of Agriculture a week later to hammer out the details for a free lunch program. But Clark was unwilling to let go of his battle against the anti-poverty programs. In a letter published in *The Hawkeye*, he expressed his frustrations that the protests by EKWRO ignored the work he and the School Board had done on behalf of low-income school children. He listed in painstaking detail the items and services that the School Board had provided to poor children: 1100 pairs of glasses, 13 hearing aids, dental care, clothing, and 1 million free lunches “although federal support for lunchrooms was hopelessly inadequate.” Clark declared that these services “were provided without demands, confrontations, fist fights or bragging on our part. We did these things because we felt that they were needed by children who couldn’t help themselves.” In his narrative, everything was fine until outsiders began to “discredit” the school board; he then questioned the intentions of volunteers (ignoring that many of the volunteers were local), stating, “These people are ignorant of Kentucky people and their laws and customs.”³⁰⁵

Several weeks after the school lunch controversy, welfare activists accused Clark of not abiding by Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), another War on Poverty measure geared to provide resources to schools serving low-income students. The

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Letter from Clark, published in *The Hawkeye*, September 1969.

committee reported that many poor children could not afford textbooks and that the School Board had not made good-faith efforts to help such students. Clark again railed against the volunteers: “Once again our good people have been mis-led by outside people who have no idea about the real facts in Floyd County.”³⁰⁶ He implied that the volunteers were Communists and that they were “beginning their revolution by attacking the Floyd County School System.”³⁰⁷ He also claimed that the School Board could not use funds for textbooks for poor children. The textbook committee followed a tactic similar to the one used during the school lunch campaign. Reaching out to federal officials for clarification, they publicized their findings that the School Board had the ability under Title I to allocate funding for textbooks. While Clark name-called and skirted the issues at hand, EKWRO activists relied on new federal laws to bolster their arguments.³⁰⁸

Clark’s attempts to undermine the efforts of activists in Floyd County did not have the impact that sedition hearings had in Pike County. By the late 1960s, groups like the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization were protected against such attacks in part because they no longer relied on federal and state funding, but on dues-paying members. Moreover, their fight for food and textbooks for students was less contentious than the issue of strip-mining. The EKWRO and the activists involved would build on the successes of the school lunch campaign to mount others about quality of life in eastern Kentucky.

The campaign in Floyd County demonstrates the grassroots activism produced by networks established through War on Poverty programs and was part of a national current of

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Charles Clark, addressed to a Preacher, September 15, 1969, published in *Appalachian Lookout*, October 1969.

³⁰⁸ EKWRO Textbook Committee to Charles Clark, October 10, 1969, letter reprinted in *The Hawkeye*, October 1969.

ideas focused on hunger and welfare rights in the United States. For those in positions of power, it was easier to believe that people had been brainwashed than to accept that people in Floyd County wanted a voice in local politics or that they were savvy political actors. To Clark, charity and services provided at the discretion of the school board should have been enough to satisfy Floyd County residents; for the local and outsider activists, a voice at the table was the ultimate goal, something that Clark would not acknowledge.³⁰⁹

The Community Health Movement

The local welfare rights group's next major battle was waged over access to health care. If women seemed to stay in the background in the school lunch campaign, they entered the spotlight in the battle for comprehensive health care. With grit and a commitment to long-term changes in their community, local women and female outsider activists joined together to successfully implement a community-run health clinic in Floyd County.

The organization found a staunch leader in Eula Hall. Hall's interest in health care was rooted in her childhood. She carried with her memories of days when death from illness and accidents were common. As a child she thought about "what makes the graveyard get filled." She recalls people getting sick from untreated wounds, mothers dying in pregnancy, and children suffering from dysentery. Death was common. After a neighbor woman suffered a wound from a rusty nail and died of lockjaw, she worried that if her own mother died nobody would take care of her. Throughout her career as a community health advocate, Hall has recited these memories,

³⁰⁹ Thorkelson, interview by Zingg

reminding her audience of what life is like when women and children have no access to medical professionals and modern medicine.³¹⁰

In her position as lay advocate, Hall began to comprehend the deep-rooted healthcare problems in Appalachia. She drove sick people to the nearest hospital and advocated on behalf of individuals who could not afford medical services. One night Hall was called upon to take a pregnant woman to the hospital. Two hospitals refused to admit the woman. By the time they got to the third hospital, the woman was in advanced labor and the hospital still refused to take her. At her wit's end, Hall wheeled the woman inside and dared the hospital attendants to leave the woman in the waiting room in front of the other patients. The attendants finally gave in and provided the woman with a room, although they turned the woman out soon after she gave birth.³¹¹ The scenes Hall witnessed planted the seeds for the Mud Creek Health Clinic, which she and other members of the welfare rights group helped to found in the early 1970s.

The Mud Creek Health Clinic was part of a region-wide community health movement in Appalachia and the South in the 1970s. By 1974, health councils were operating in many small communities and about a dozen clinics had opened up in the mountains, many of them a part of a confederation of councils that organized under the Council of the Southern Mountains Health Commission. Assisted by a generation of medical students, professionals, and legal aid volunteers inspired by the civil rights movement and influenced by the energy and ideas of health equality organizations, such as the Medical Committee on Human Rights and Health Policy Advisory Committee (Health/PAC), rural clinics sought to provide medical services to

³¹⁰ Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad.

³¹¹ Ibid.

poor communities and assist locals with setting up clinics and health education programs throughout the South.³¹²

The delivery of health care to the poor was a fundamental concern of War on Poverty legislation, most notably in the creation of programs to finance care for the elderly (through Medicare) and the poor (through Medicaid). These programs reimbursed physicians and providers and gave poor and elderly people unprecedented access to health care. Yet, these programs did not address two fundamental problems in the health care system: many people lacked access to health care because they lived far from hospitals, and others avoided hospitals because of racial and class barriers and a history of discrimination. Advocates of “community health” sought to address these concerns and to provide new models of care by opening neighborhood clinics; focusing on primary care and preventive services; and building relationships with community members in order to address environmental and social concerns related to health. Many neighborhood clinics were supported initially by the OEO, while others like the Mud Creek Clinic sought private funding.³¹³ Regardless of funding sources, the wave of clinics that opened in the late 1960s and 1970s had common goals. Leading community health activist Dr. H. Jack Geiger has argued that, along with making health care more accessible,

³¹² The Health Commission of the Council of the Southern Mountains helped to coordinate health affairs and kept lists of health councils and clinics in the mountains. For instance, in 1970, it helped staff health fairs in seven counties and provided exams to 2201 people and “health education services” to 3169 people. See “Description of Organizations,” Box 91, Folder 9, CSM Records II; “Health Fairs—1970 Annual Report,” Box 92, Folder 5, CSM Records II; “Report of the Health Commission Staff, 1971-1971, Box 92, Folder 6, CSM Records II. For another example of a clinic in Appalachia, see Kate Bradley and J.W. Bradley, interviews by Evangeline Mee, May 29 and August 11, 2012, U0803 and U0804, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

³¹³ The Mud Creek Clinic was funded initially by the United Mine Workers of America, locally raised money, and donations. In the 1980s it won a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission and is now a part of Big Sandy Health Care, Inc., a private non-profit corporation that includes six clinics in eastern Kentucky. See “About U,” Big Sandy Health Care, Inc., <http://www.bshc.org/index.php?page=how-cmsms-works>, accessed February 18, 2014.

neighborhood clinics used “social and political change to affect those powerful determinants of health status that lie in the economic and social order.”³¹⁴

Maxine Kenny, a community health pioneer, came to Kentucky from New York City in September 1970. For the three previous years she had worked with the Health Policy Advisory Center (Health/PAC) which was founded by Rob Burlage, a civil rights activist who had worked on SDS’s Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) from 1963-1964.³¹⁵ Health/PAC promoted community-centered approaches to health care in New York’s crumbling medical system, and it critiqued the “medical industrial complex” and the two-class system of health care.³¹⁶ During her tenure Kenny wrote for the organization’s bulletin, led workshops for community groups and progressive medical professionals, and contributed to two books, *American Health Empire* and *Race and Politics in New York City*. In 1970 Howard Thorkelson contacted Maxine Kenny and the Health/PAC to request assistance for miners with disabilities, including black lung disease, who were having a difficult time securing disability benefits. Sick miners needed to locate a doctor who understood the disease and would verify that a miner had the illness and qualified for assistance, an often fraught and difficult process. Kenny volunteered to go to eastern Kentucky, where she held workshops on community health organizing. She also

³¹⁴ Dr. H. Jack Geiger, “Community Health Centers: Health Care as an Instruments of Social Change,” in *Reforming Medicine: Lessons of the Last Quarter Century*, ed. Victor W. Sidel and Ruth Sidel (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 12-13. For a history of one of the first and most successful community health centers, the Tufts-Delta Health Center in Mississippi founded in 1965, see John Dittmer, *The Good Doctors: The Medical Committee for Human Rights and the Struggle for Social Justice in Health Care* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009).

³¹⁵ “Rob Burlage Papers, 1956-1973,” Biography/History, Wisconsin Historical Society, <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi/f/findaid/findaid-idx?c=wiarchives;view=reslist;subview=standard;didno=uw-whs-mss00359;focusrgn=bioghist;cc=wiarchives;byte=144816930>.

³¹⁶ Merlin Chowkwanyun, “The New Left and Public Health: The Health Policy Advisory Center, Community Organizing, and the Big Business of Health, 1967-1975,” *American Journal of Public Health*, 101, 2 (February 2011): 238-249, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3020214/>, accessed October 2013.

recruited a medical student to spend a summer in the mountains and explore the possibility of creating community-controlled health services for miners and their families.³¹⁷

It was not long before Kenny was drawn back to the mountains. She believed it was important “to build links between the progressive medical forces around the country and the people in the mountains,” who lacked access to quality medical care and who had been ignored by the medical profession. Kenny became the consummate community organizer, committed to using her skills and connections to assist local people in their struggle. Kenny also had personal motivations for moving to the mountains. Her parents relocated her and her siblings from their farm in northern Ontario to Flint, Michigan, in the early 1940s, drawn by the opportunities created by the auto manufacturing industry. She understood a life of “sporadic work, commodity foods, and getting by.” After attending the University of Michigan, a feat in itself for a child of working-class parents without formal education, she had spent her early adult life working for social change, first as the deputy director of OEO in Vermont and then at Health/PAC. The burgeoning community health movement was a natural next step.³¹⁸

When Kenny arrived in Kentucky, community activists were embroiled in a controversy over the Floyd County Comprehensive Health Services Program which had been funded by the OEO beginning in 1967. Welfare and community activists had two major problems with the program. First, it did not provide direct care, but was a “referral and coordinating mechanism.” Patients could go to an outpost where they would be seen by a nurse and then possibly referred to a physician in town.³¹⁹ Instead of providing comprehensive health services within the

³¹⁷ Merlin Chowkwanyun, “The New Left and Public Health,” and Personal Papers, in Maxine Kenny’s possession.

³¹⁸ Personal Papers, in Maxine Kenny’s possession.

³¹⁹ Couto, 58-59.

community, the program provided transportation from the rural outpost to the doctors' offices in town. Welfare rights activists argued that poor people needed direct care services, not a "taxi service."³²⁰ Second, community activists argued that the program was politics as usual, with no local input or control, and it served "to strengthen the control that a few people in Floyd County have over the majority of county residents."³²¹ Moreover, it seemed to them that the program padded the pockets of doctors in the county seat more than it eased the medical burdens of poor people in the county.³²²

The Republican Governor Louie B. Nunn also scrutinized the health program. As part of his attack on the War on Poverty in Kentucky, he charged that the program in Floyd County was rife with corruption. He pointed out that Floyd County was the district of Representative Carl D. Perkins, who had been deeply involved in the planning and implementation of the War on Poverty and the OEO. The EKWRO also believed that corruption was a problem in the program, due in part to control of political elites and associates of Perkins. But instead of calling for the program to be cut, it offered a proposal on how it could be reformed. They believed that, to be successful, the program needed the input of poor people, and it needed to develop comprehensive medical services in rural areas instead of expecting poor people to travel to the county seat for services.³²³

OEO officials responded to criticisms of the program almost immediately. In 1968 a site evaluation team found that the program made no "basic changes in the existing medical care

³²⁰ Couto, 124.

³²¹ Couto, 125.

³²² Hall, interview with author, September 2012; Dr. H. Jack Geiger identified the struggle over community control as one of the major issues in the development of community health centers, as health professionals and community board members debated how best to operate clinics. See Geiger, "Community Health Centers," 20.

³²³ Homer Bigart, "Antipoverty Programs Imperiled in Appalachia," *The New York Times*, June 15, 1971.

system” and that the medical services provided were very poor quality.³²⁴ Two years later the Office of Health Affairs, which soon replaced the OEO in oversight and funding of health centers, sent another evaluation team, which also reported that the program was fundamentally flawed: it failed to include input from representatives of the population served; it had not hired nonprofessionals from the community; and the health educators it employed spent little time with the people they were supposed to serve. Moreover, the health programs simply came nowhere close to being comprehensive. Some medical outposts were inaccessible, and even when a person was referred to a physician in town, the offices were so packed that doctors had little time to provide adequate care. Other elements of the program were so fraught as to be unhelpful to the majority of the population. The family planning portion of the program required women’s husbands to agree to their participation in the program, creating a barrier to women’s health services. And there seemed to be a conflict of interest: the doctors who helped to design the program (and to assess the fees) were the same physicians treating the patients.³²⁵

As chair of the EKWRO’s health committee, Eula Hall led the charge to reform the OEO-funded program. She had been a consistent volunteer since the mid-1960s, but now she was a woman in the spotlight, leading the health committee and testifying at public hearings. To the people threatened by the welfare rights group and its challenges to the federally-funded program, Hall was a well-intentioned woman who was being manipulated. One board member stated that welfare rights activists “pushed” Hall “out front,” continuing that “every time something popped up she had a written statement.” Questioning Hall’s capabilities, the board member stated, “Now she isn’t qualified to make those statements. Every time I saw [EKWRO activists] they had three

³²⁴ Couto, *Poverty, Politics, and Health Care*, 71.

³²⁵ Couto, 75.

or four attorneys with them and somebody was putting words in their mouth. I don't know who it was, but I know damn well it wasn't Eula Hall.”³²⁶ It was unimaginable to this particular board member that Hall had knowledge of the problems in her region or that she was capable of analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the health program.

Following evaluations in 1970 the OEO discontinued funding of the program and called for reorganization. In 1971, the Office of Health Affairs made new plans for a program in Floyd County, and again a battle between local elites on the board of health and the EKWRO heated up. The executive committee failed once again to provide a truly comprehensive health care system, noted by both Health Affairs officials and welfare rights activists, and it would not countenance any criticism. The committee dismissed Dr. Arnold Schechter, a former instructor at Harvard assigned to work on the program, who had objected to the machine politics in Floyd County. While federal officials pressed the committee to work towards fully functioning clinics, EKWRO focused on what they perceived to be the root of the problem: the program illustrated “what easily happens when programs to provide valuable medical service to poor people are not controlled by the poor people themselves.”³²⁷ The welfare rights group proposed a program in which doctors, nurses, and a dentist would be employed at a local clinic, hired on a salary rather than fee-for-service basis.

In February 1971 the welfare rights activists began a publicity campaign with the hopes of pushing the Office of Health Affairs for real reform. They picketed the local comprehensive health program's central offices, the Floyd County Courthouse, and the Prestonsburg General Hospital. Using her connections to journalists, Maxine Kenny helped to generate interest in the story. Picking up the news, the national press sympathized with the activists' position that the

³²⁶ Couto, 134.

³²⁷ Couto, 123-125.

health program failed to meet its standard of providing comprehensive health care to poor people. She also helped EKWRO organize a public hearing, during which a group of medical professionals, activists, and local people came together and testified. Eula Hall and a legal aid lawyer chaired the meeting. Dr. Arnold Schecter was among the group of medical professionals to speak, as was Dr. Oliver Fein from Health-PAC. Patients testified about the inadequate treatment they had received at regional hospitals. After a performance by local singers, Jay Blevins of the EKWRO read a “Bill of Health Rights,” written by the welfare rights organization’s health committee.

In the tradition of the welfare bill of rights promoted by the National Welfare Rights Organization, the “Bill of Health Rights” declared that “health care is a right, not a privilege for those who happen to have money.” The bill called for an end to the exploitation of poor people by medical professionals; for the University of Kentucky Medical School to commit funds and training the sons and daughters of coal miners to serve the region; and for the involvement and leadership of poor people in the design and implementation of a comprehensive health program. The bill closed with the statement: “The Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization pledged to fight for decent health care for all people in Eastern Kentucky. We believe all patients should be treated with respect and dignity and should receive quality services in well-equipped hospitals and clinics near their home.”³²⁸

Ultimately, the Office of Health Affairs decided to defund the Floyd County comprehensive health program, but the EKWRO health committee was not willing to give up their fight for medical services for Floyd County residents. Over the next several years, EKWRO used two approaches to expand health services: filing law suits when hospitals refused to serve

³²⁸ “Bill of Health Rights,” Box 107, Folder 9, CSM Records II; Couto, 183-185.

poor people and running health fairs and other community health projects. The health committee provided the basis for a permanent clinic in the Mud Creek community.

The welfare rights group launched a legal challenge in 1971, focusing on hospitals that, despite having non-profit status, refused to serve more than a handful of people who could not afford services. *Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization v. Simon*, a class action lawsuit against the Internal Revenue Service, became part of the Hill-Burton cases, a series of class action suits that claimed that “hospitals receiving construction funds under the Hill-Burton Act had incurred an obligation to provide free care and community service to the medically indigent and poor.” Leading up to the legal challenges, a pair of lawyers from the National Health Law Program of the Legal Services Corporation had published two articles explaining that the Hill-Burton Act contained provisions that hospitals constructed or expanded under the Act were required to provide care to persons unable to pay for services. Marilyn G. Rose, one of the lawyers leading the research, had been involved previously in cases against Hill-Burton hospitals that discriminated on the basis of race. From 1966 to 1968 she was Acting Chief of the Health Civil Rights Branch of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) and was involved in cases to assure that hospitals complied with the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

After leaving HEW Rose focused on the provisions in Hill-Burton that applied to the indigent poor. In the late 1960s, Rose sought test cases around the country in which clients had been denied hospital services because they could not pay. She became the attorney of record in the EKWRO’s case, and while the case itself did not have standing in the courts, it became part of a series of cases that ultimately led to amendments to the Hill-Burton Act requiring that private, non-profit hospitals with tax-exempt status must post their obligations to treat people for free or below cost if they could not afford services. The court also found that private, non-profit

hospitals in Floyd and Pike Counties had not provided sufficient charitable services to receive tax-exempt services. All in all, the Hill-Burton cases helped to rectify the assumption that Medicaid and Medicare solved the problem of poor people's medical care and prevented hospitals from refusing treatment to poor people.³²⁹

But the legal challenges did not change the fact that many poor people in rural areas could not easily access hospitals. In the 1970s, activists in the community health movement considered how to bring comprehensive health services to rural people in Appalachia. The EKWRO was one of the leaders in developing new kinds of services that reflected the needs of community members and included them in decision-making.

In the summer of 1971, Maxine Kenny recruited Vanderbilt University's Student Health Coalition to partner with the EKWRO health committee for a week-long health fair. The Student Health Coalition, a student-organized project initiated in 1968 by Vanderbilt University and Meharry Medical College students, worked with rural communities throughout Appalachia and the rural South to improve poor people's access to health care. The students usually stayed in the homes of community members. Along with helping to organize health fairs, where they would see up to 400 people in a week, they trained local people to provide lay services, including taking blood pressure and analyzing urine samples.³³⁰

At the same time that health fairs addressed the needs of a community, they were effective organizing tools as well. One doctor who worked with the Student Health Coalition explained that "Health was used as an entree because of its common interest to all, health in its

³²⁹ P.A. Paul Shaheen and Harry Perlstadt, "Class Action Suits and Social Change: The Organization and Impact of the Hill-Burton Cases," *Indiana Law Journal* 57 (1982), in Digital Repository at Maurer Law, Maurer School of Law, Indiana University; "EKWRO Wins Health Care Suit," *Mountain Life and Work*, March 1974.

³³⁰ F.T. Billings, "A teaching relationship: students in rural health care," *Transactions of the American Clinical and Climatological Association* 21 (1980): 167-176, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2279449/>.

broadest sense meaning physical and spiritual well-being and proper economic and social environment.” Medical volunteers provided health screenings and also worked with communities to identify areas of research and set up local clinics. They identified common themes in the communities where they worked: “generally characterized by the lack of control over factors affecting health care, lack of adequate financial resources for delivery of health care, [and] lack of effective influence on authorities over health-related aspects of their environment.”³³¹ The health fairs were free to the public and had a festive quality, unlike what so many poor people experienced in hospitals. Moreover, local leaders could use the health fairs as a foundation to bring up issues of workplace safety and environmental hazards.³³²

In Floyd County, medical students and professionals associated with the Student Health Coalition offered physical exams and diagnostic tests, seeing 500 residents during the week. For two days during the fair they focused on lung exams for miners who were at risk for black lung disease. With a diagnosis, miners could take steps to apply to the Social Security Administration for black lung compensation. For many poor people, the physical exams they received at the fair were the first full medical exams of their lives.³³³

Health fairs helped to educate the community about what comprehensive health services entailed. As Eula Hall explained to reporters, many poor people avoided going to the doctor because they feared being turned away: “they dread the harassment, the charges that come when

³³¹ “Description of Organizations,” Box 91, Folder 8, CSM Records II.

³³² F.T. Billings, “A teaching relationship: students in rural health care.”

³³³ “Proposals for a Mud Creek Health Program,” Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization, Floyd County, Kentucky, Folder 11, Box 107, CSM Records II.

they can't afford it because they don't have some kind of medical card.”³³⁴ The health fair offered the opportunity for poor people to experience very different kinds of care.

In the summer of 1972, the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization began a summer health project that laid the foundation for a permanent physical clinic. A clinic required devoted medical professionals who understood the importance of community-controlled health care. The welfare rights group found allies in Drs. Elinor Graham and Jim Squire, who Maxine Kenny met through her New York contacts.

Elinor Graham was not new to Appalachia. She had worked in Myers Fork, Kentucky, as a VISTA worker in 1965, leaving Appalachia after a year to pursue a degree in medicine. Her plan was to gain a skill and then move back to the mountains. While in medical school at the University of Rochester, Graham joined the Health/PAC and helped to set up inner city health projects. After she graduated, she was part of the Lincoln Collective, an effort by activist medical residents, community members, and hospital staff to reform the Lincoln Hospital, a former charity hospital in the Bronx that served low-income, Puerto Rican communities. Community members referred to the hospital as “the butcher shop” because of the abysmal quality of services.³³⁵ By the time of her residency at Lincoln, Graham had married Jim Squire, who had been born in and lived most of his life in Brooklyn, New York. After two years of pediatric residency, Graham looked for a place to start practicing in the mountains, and she convinced Squire, who was also a pediatrician, that they should locate to Appalachia.³³⁶

³³⁴ “Why a Health Fair? Discussion with Floyd County, Kentucky People,” *Mountain Life and Work*, July-August 1971, 11-15.

³³⁵ Galit M. Sacajiu and Aaron Fox, “Still Marching in a White Coat,” *Health Affairs* 27 (March 2008): 583-584, <http://content.healthaffairs.org/content/27/2/583.full>.

³³⁶ Graham, interview with Kline; Graham, interview with the author.

In 1971, Graham met Eula Hall and learned about the EKWRO health committee at a meeting of the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR) in Lexington, Kentucky. The MCHR was formed by a group of volunteers and activists in 1964 to provide medical care for civil rights workers. For the next several decades the organization supplied health care professionals “wherever there was a demonstration or confrontation,” from civil rights marches to student rebellions, and it provided a model for community health centers.³³⁷ Maxine Kenny had helped to convince the National Medical Committee for Human Rights to hold their annual conference in Kentucky to expose the medical profession to health care issues in Appalachia. The conference included sessions on the EKWRO health committee, strip-mining as a health concern, and information about black lung disease and organizing efforts by the Black Lung Association. Within a year of the conference, Graham and Squire joined the community health movement in eastern Kentucky.³³⁸

In the summer of 1972, Drs. Elinor Graham and Jim Squire helped to set up a two-month summer health project in Floyd County that focused on health screening. Graham and Squire believed that medical professionals had to build relationships with community people and work with them to prevent and treat diseases. The project employed eleven teenage health workers who were trained by six medical volunteers. The project’s stated goal was to “provide some service by helping to detect and treat common illnesses, and encourage the eleven health workers to become interested in health careers and more aware of the health problems in their community. The longer range goal was to build community interest in developing a permanent health program and clinic in the Mud Creek area.” The teenage workers, ranging in ages 15-18, participated in spring training sessions where they learned the basics of taking health histories

³³⁷ Dittmer, *The Good Doctors*, x-xi.

³³⁸ Elinor Graham, interview with the author; Personal Papers, in Maxine Kenny’s possession.

and doing lab work. At first, some of the teenagers were uncomfortable entering the homes of family members or acquaintances, but they soon were “self-assured,” as “they quickly learned their way through a maze of record forms, new medical terms and names, and a lab full of equipment like microscopes, incubators, centrifuges and pipettes.”³³⁹

The medical team visited over 700 people and 184 homes, selected by the health committee based on need. Over a third of the people visited had no medical insurance, while the rest had partial benefits either through the UMWA or public assistance. The health team performed comprehensive health tests: evaluating hearing and vision; taking urine, stool, and blood tests; and examining for TB, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Once they had the results, the medical workers provided patients with a copy of their health record and offered them medical advice or referred them to health department services.³⁴⁰

The results of the project were sobering. Ten percent of patients had tuberculosis and were not receiving appropriate treatments. Over 40 percent of patients had mild to severe anemia. Chronic ear infections and hearing loss were common problems in children, and nearly a third of the adults tested had poor vision but could not afford eye glasses or treatment for cataracts.

The most pervasive problem turned out to be parasite infections. About half of the patients were tested for a variety of parasites, and of those tested, 50 percent had some form of parasite due to water contamination. Along with testing for parasites, the medical workers documented water sources and evaluated water samples. They set up a “micro-biology lab,” and as Graham recalls, it was not long before the teenage health workers learned to recognize parasite eggs in stool samples. They also began to understand the association between well

³³⁹ “Medical Summary for Summer Health Project,” Folder 11, Box 107, CSM Records II.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

water, outdoor privies, and contaminants. Of the families visited, 80 percent used outdoor toilets. Graham remembers, “As soon as they learned what was going on with the sanitation and how it impacted families in terms of the contamination of the wells. They were real crusaders.” The youth medical workers educated the community about water contaminants and spread information about moving outhouses away from gardens and water sources. They also helped to distribute medications to families who tested positive for parasites, and they taught families how to clean wells and purify water.³⁴¹

More than most health issues, the epidemic of parasites could be solved largely with community education. Graham remembers that many people simply did not know how parasites spread (many attributed worms to eating too many sweets), and that once people understood the correlation between outdoor privies and water sources, they moved their wells or began to take measures to connect to city water. Once they were treated for parasites, other health problems, such as anemia, would also begin to improve. Offered resources and medical support, community members could take action to improve their own quality of life.³⁴²

Following the success of the health fair, EKWRO activists wrote a proposal to establish a permanent health clinic in Mud Creek. The proposal opened: “The health problems of the people of Mud Creek are plentiful—the health services are scarce, hard to get to, and are usually provided by doctors who are more interested in money than in healing. The residents of Mud Creek usually go looking for health care when we feel it is an emergency and therefore the diagnosis of a serious medical problem is often too late. To get to be seen by a doctor, Mud Creek residents must travel many miles over bad mountain roads only to wait in crowded

³⁴¹ Ibid; Graham, interview by Kline.

³⁴² Ibid.

hospital clinics and emergency rooms all day long and into the night. And it is not unusual for a person to have to return a second or a third day in order to be seen.”³⁴³

After their attempt to become a federally-recognized National Health Services Corp site failed, activists sought to raise enough money through fundraisers and charitable donations. Several people who were involved with the clinic at the time recalled that the Appalachian Volunteers, which was closing its doors, donated the last of the funds in its account to the project.³⁴⁴ Once established, the clinic worked with the UMWA health and retirement fund, which paid a monthly stipend to the clinic for each of its members who enrolled there. Amounting to about \$5000 a month, the funds were enough to support the clinic.³⁴⁵ A local man offered to rent a house he owned so that it could be converted into a clinic. And Drs. Elinor Graham and Jim Squire worked for an annual salary of \$1 each. They were able to do so because they worked part-time at a hospital in a neighboring county.³⁴⁶

The Mud Creek Health Project officially opened on February 11, 1973, with a community celebration befitting its origins: more than 600 people attended the opening of the clinic. A headline captured the mood: “This clinic is a dream come true.” As Eula Hall said, the clinic belonged to the people of Mud Creek. “They can go and feel assured to see a doctor and they don’t have to worry about being turned away.”³⁴⁷ Hall also placed the clinic within a history of antipoverty activism: “We’re having the best care in history. This is the first clinic ever on

³⁴³ “Application for a Health Team from National Health Service Corps,” Folder 11, Box 107, CSM Records II.

³⁴⁴ Hall, interview with Harry Rice, November 10, 2004, Council of the Southern Mountains Oral History Project, Southern Appalachian Archives, Berea College; Graham, interview with Kline.

³⁴⁵ “Sick for Clinics,” *Southern Exposure* VI (Summer 1978).

³⁴⁶ Graham, interview with Kline.

³⁴⁷ “Mountain Health Care,” *Mountain Life and Work*, February 1973.

Mud Creek.” She noted that people on public assistance could afford exams at a low cost, which meant “more money for the poor.”³⁴⁸

The structure of the clinic reflected EKWRO’s desire to involve poor people in planning and implementation and to connect individual and community health. The community board included retired or active miners, low-income, community representatives, and staff people. Once the clinic had a solid budget, all of the staff received equal salaries. The by-laws laid out plans for the clinic, but they also outlined more expansive goals, including working “for the improvement of the health and welfare of poor people in the region,” educating people about the health care needs of rural people, and assisting members “in all ways possible to obtain good quality health care.”³⁴⁹

Reflecting its relationship with the United Mine Workers of America, the clinic provided special services for miners. The board hired respiratory therapists to treat disabled miners who suffered from black lung disease. It also hired Eula Hall as a social worker, and a major focus of her work was helping people who had been diagnosed with or potentially suffered from black lung disease. She visited homes to educate people about the clinic and black lung, and once someone was diagnosed, she helped them sign up for benefits.³⁵⁰

The clinic was an immediate success. For the first time, poor people in the community could count on receiving comprehensive care from a physician. Patients were charged a four dollar office fee, but if they had no money, they were not turned away. If a patient could not afford medication, it was provided at no cost. At first the clinic was open only two days a week.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Graham, interview by Kline; Hall, interview by Boothby and Korstad.

On those two days the clinic stopped registering patients at 5:00 p.m. but often continued to see them until 8 o'clock in the evening.³⁵¹

By 1976 the clinic had outgrown the small house the Mud Creek Health Project rented. Eula Hall proposed that the clinic move into her house. She recalls, "My house was bigger. One night I go home. I sit there in that house and I'd say I could do this here and so I said I'm just going to get [out] of here and divide this into a clinic and have a clinic here in my house." The clinic staff divided the bedrooms into six examining rooms, turned the kitchen into a nurses' station, converted the family room into a pharmacy and the living room into a waiting room and office area. The project also expanded its services, seeing up to 40-60 patients a day and providing home visits. The clinic had its own lab and pharmacy, education and counseling services, a monthly family planning clinic, an incubator for premature babies, and a respiratory clinic for miners and others with lung disease. The clinic worked with Our Lady of the Way Hospital in Martin County, Kentucky, which accepted referrals for x-rays and surgeries at the hospital. Sally Ward Maggard, staff writer for *Mountain Life & Work*, reported, "On any given day the waiting room is full [with] miners, children, expectant mothers. It's a place where anyone can expect careful examination and diagnosis and treatment."³⁵²

The EKWRO maintained an on-going relationship with the clinic. The group received funding for a community van, which they used to shuttle people who did not own cars or who could not drive (typically the elderly, sick, or disabled but also young mothers) to the clinic as well as to other social service offices. In the summer of 1975, Naomi Little, a housewife and EKWRO co-chairman, was hired as a driver three days a week. She kept meticulous records of her travels, which give a sense of the needs of the community at the time. She took "loads of

³⁵¹ "Mountain Health Care," *Mountain Life and Work*, February 1973.

³⁵² Sally Maggard, "Rural Health Care," *Mountain Life and Work*, November 1976.

people” to the food stamp office and legal aid, shuttled patients from the clinic to the hospital, and carried mothers to offices where they could pick up vouchers for baby formula. When she was not needed as a driver, she provided assistance to the clinic staff. The van services, which the EKWRO referred to as the “transportation co-op,” epitomized the group’s community work. In a newspaper article, one of the members Woodrow Rogers, a disabled miner, stated about the group, “Any problem, we’ll work on it!”³⁵³

In 1977 the clinic faced a funding crisis as the UMWA’s Health and Retirement Fund took a hit following a series of strikes and replaced its retainer system with fee-for-service. Moreover, a government agency discontinued a grant for black lung therapy, and the clinic had to cease respiratory therapy. The clinic managed to break even and continued to provide a range of services that reflected the philosophy of community health. As clinic administrator Pat Little explained, “Our clinic tries to give people what they need. We not only have a doctor and nurse, but we also have a therapy room for black lung and a social worker [who] can look after people, to [help them sign up for] food stamps, to go to hearing to see that their rights are protected and taken care of.” She feared that the clinic would be forced to close if it did not start charging fees-for-service, but she also knew that in a given month a quarter to half of all patients did not have the money to pay.³⁵⁴

Despite its initial problems with the local medical establishment during the OEO controversy, the clinic eventually turned to federal offices and federally-supported programs for assistance. In the mid-1970s the clinic became part of the local non-profit Big Sandy Health Care, which operated several clinics in the area, and it also became a member of the National Health Service Corps, a program that recruited doctors to low-income communities in need of

³⁵³ “Any Problem, We’ll Work on It,” *Mountain Life and Work*, January 1973.

³⁵⁴ See “Sick for Clinics,” *Southern Exposure*.

medical professionals. After a devastating fire in the 1980s, the clinic received a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission. Currently it is listed as a National Resources and Services Administration grant-funded health center.

The clinic exemplifies organizing efforts that continued into the 1970s; as the War on Poverty's visibility receded, antipoverty activists continued to seek ways to trigger broad social change at the same time they addressed the immediate needs of poor communities. In Floyd County, antipoverty activists worked alongside progressive medical professionals to enact a grassroots community health movement and joined, as activist Dr. H. Jack Geiger described it, "the most extensive concerted public effort in the history of the United States to expand ambulatory care resources in poverty communities on a nationwide basis." At the same time, the community health movement implemented a new version of modern health care in which clinics responded to the needs of the community by offering an array of programming, from basic medical services and occupational health services to assistance with food stamps.³⁵⁵

Making Connections

As the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization was enjoying success at the local level, Steve Brooks continued to work with welfare rights activists to strengthen a state-wide coalition and build relationships with state officials who made decisions about welfare policies. In 1972 welfare rights activists reached out to the new commissioner of Economic Security in Kentucky, the first woman and social worker appointed to the position. Huecker was responsive

³⁵⁵ Geiger, "Community Health Centers." See also Lily M. Hoffman, *The Politics of Knowledge: Activist Movements in Medicine and Planning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987). On the relationship between health and democracy, see Richard A. Couto, with Stephanie C. Eken, *To Give Their Gifts: Health, Community, and Democracy* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002).

to the organization's desire to build bridges between welfare rights organizations and state officials. After a two-day meeting with welfare rights activists from across the state, she agreed to work on new contracts for food stamp issuance offices so that they could be situated in U.S. Post Offices. Currently, they were located only in county court houses far from where most rural people lived. At a state-wide welfare rights meeting in the fall, Huecker became the first Commissioner of Economic Security to address an assembly of welfare recipients. At that meeting she informed the activists that she would allow the Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization a desk at all public assistance offices so that they could meet with recipients.³⁵⁶ After years of fighting the governor and commissioners for the chance to simply meet and discuss state welfare policies, Huecker was a welcome change.

At the local level, the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization continued to extend its reach, taking on any issues that threatened the health and well-being of poor people in eastern Kentucky. The group maintained a sense that the best way to produce change was to address the interconnected needs of poor people. It offered support to groups throughout eastern Kentucky that sought to improve the overall health and welfare of communities.

In early 1972 EKWRO members joined direct action protests to stop the strip-mining that wreaked havoc on homes and communities. Arguing that an all-woman group would be less likely than men to provoke violence from the opposition, the Knott County chapter of the Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People (AGSLP) invited women from several organizations to join their protest. The Knott County group had been involved in protracted battles to stop strip-mining in their communities. Women reported how they dealt daily with

³⁵⁶ "Appalachian Roundup, Kentucky WRO Meets New Welfare Commissioner," *Mountain Life and Work*, June-July 1972, 34; "Appalachian Roundup, KY WRO Wins on Food Stamps," *Mountain Life and Work*, August 1972; "Appalachian Roundup, Kentucky, Commissioner Huecker Addressed State Welfare Rights Group," *Mountain Life and Work*, November 1972.

dangerous conditions produced by strip mine operations, including mud and rock slides that made roads impassable, preventing them from traveling and their children from going to school. Strip mining and the run-off that it created ruined the hillsides that people had long farmed. For people in an already economically depressed area to lose crops, orchards, and the fields where they kept cows, hogs, and goats could be devastating. Strip-mining had devastating psychological effects. At a hearing several months before the protest, one woman testified that a coal company stripped the land where her baby was buried and did not inform her until after rocks and dirt were piled on top of the graves. She expressed grief over the fact that she would never again be able to visit the gravesite.³⁵⁷ Working in alliance with women from AGSLP, a group of women from EKWRO and other organizations participated in a direct-action protest at a strip-mine site that gained national attention and furthered the slow but important process of developing better laws on strip mining.³⁵⁸ In April 1972, the welfare rights group was part of another effort to shut down a stripping operation along the Floyd-Knott County border that had destroyed bridges, roads, and homes and had led to the death of one person. They garnered 1000 signatures on a petition to close the operation, and two months later they organized a direct-action protest during which 200 people forced a strip mine operation to shut down.³⁵⁹

The welfare rights group also built important alliances with the black lung movement. During the March for Survival in Washington, D.C., the group helped to circulate petitions to improve black lung legislation. Along with providing much-needed medical services and

³⁵⁷ "People's Democracy," *Mountain Life and Work*, November 1971.

³⁵⁸ Mary Beth Bingman, "Stopping the Bulldozers: What Difference Did it Make?" in *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change*, ed. Stephen L. Fisher (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); and "Any Problem We'll Work on It," *Mountain Life and Work*.

³⁵⁹ "Appalachian Roundup, Floyd County Strippers Attacked," *Mountain Life and Work*, May 1972; "Strip Mining Fight Goes National," *Mountain Life and Work*, June-July 1972.

screening for miners with black lung disease, the clinic offered space to black lung activists when they needed to organize a petition or lobbying effort. As the social worker at the clinic, Eula Hall bore witness to the difficulties facing miners who sought black lung benefits, even after the 1972 amendment. She describes vividly her impression that once a miner retired from the industry, they did not go “to green pasture” but “home to suffer.” She remembers those years when black lung was common: “You can go up and down this road in the summer any hour of the night, you’ll hear somebody talk, it’ll be dark, it’ll be a light on, you hear somebody coughing and there’ll be a man sitting on the porch trying to breathe.” She continued, “I’ve stopped [and asked,] ‘What’re you doing up, what’re you doing out?’ ‘I’m trying to get my breath. I just couldn’t sleep.’ You don’t hear them complaining. They may not even come into the doctor the next day. They come in when they think they’re going to smother to death.”³⁶⁰

In 1971 black lung activists founded a state-wide organization, the Kentucky Black Lung Association, so that they could better lobby for effective and fair policies for disabled miners. William “Bill” Worthington, an African American and disabled miner who was a leader in the UMWA and the black lung movement, was elected the first president of the organization, and Eula Hall was elected the Vice-President. To have a black man and white woman head the organization sent a powerful message of working-class solidarity. Many people living in the coal fields, regardless of race or gender, had been affected by the disease, either becoming ill or caring for sick family members. The Kentucky Black Lung Association built on a legacy of interracial organizing in the UMWA and reflected the importance of women activists in the organizations’ success.

³⁶⁰ Hall, interview with Boothby and Korstad.

In her own community Hall acted as a lay advocate for miners who could not afford attorneys. She remembers the impact black lung benefits had on miners and their families, how it lifted hundreds of people out of poverty. She recalls, “Every time [miners with black lung disease] got any kind of money over what they had to live on, they repaired their house. They would put [in] indoor plumbing, and they’d add a room on, or they’d remodel and make their house a lot more comfortable. They’d get a better vehicle, and they could buy better clothes for their children, educate their kids better.” Like the clinic and welfare rights campaigns, black lung benefits fit into a broader effort to improve the quality of life for eastern Kentucky families.³⁶¹

In 1973, Eula Hall and other clinic staff and members of the EKWRO joined the labor struggles that had begun to rock eastern Kentucky.³⁶² Hospital employees went on strike at the Pikeville Methodist Hospital.³⁶³ Hall and others carpooled to the hospital and joined the picket lines, made up mostly of female workers. When a miners’ strike began in Harlan County in 1973, a strike that would soon galvanize activists from across the country and draw national attention, Hall, clinic staff, and EKWRO members were again poised to join their sisters and brothers on the picket lines. Hall learned of the Brookside Mine Strike at a health fair, and she and other clinic workers and community people joined the picket lines and allied with the women’s club that formed in Harlan County. The strike and the working-class Appalachian Movement of which it was a part provided an opening for women activists across eastern

³⁶¹ Hall, interview with Boothby and Korstad.

³⁶² Hall, interview with author, September 2012.

³⁶³ For a narrative of the strike, see Sally Ward Maggard, “We’re Fighting Millionaires!: The Clash of Gender and Class in Appalachian Women’s Union Organizing,” in *No Middle Ground: Women and Radical Protest*, ed. Kathleen Blee (New York: New York University Press, 1998), and “Coal Field Women Making History,” in *Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes*.

Kentucky to build alliances and to spotlight their experiences and struggles as women in Appalachia.

CHAPTER FIVE

Women, Labor, and Protest in Harlan County

At daybreak on October 23, 1973, dozens of women prepared to hold the picket line in Harlan County, Kentucky. Dense fog silhouetted the gathering crowd. State police stood on one side of the road, forming human fences to keep protesters out of the street. “Very tough looking women” stood on the other side. These women were members of the Brookside Women’s Club, a group of miners’ wives, daughters, sisters, and supporters who were picketing on behalf of miners who were on strike at the Eastover Mining Company in Brookside, Kentucky. The men had walked off their jobs after the company refused to recognize their vote to form a local of the United Mine Workers of America. Events from the past few days portended conflict. Ninety strikebreakers had arrived, and the state police were prepared to escort them and mine bosses onto company property. Meanwhile, hundreds of union supporters from Kentucky and Virginia mines joined locals on the picket line. Tensions broke when one carload of strikebreakers made it past the picketers. Before the second car could pass through, Lois Scott called out to her comrades in the Brookside Women’s Club, “Come on, girls! Lay down! Lay Down!” Scott, Betty Eldridge, and Melba Strong stretched across the road to block a car from entering the company gates. If the men wanted to break the picket line, they would first have to run over the protesters. Despite jeers from the crowd, the state police quickly intervened. They dragged the women into police cars and carried them to jail.³⁶⁴

³⁶⁴ *Harlan County, USA*, Criterion Collection, DVD, directed by Barbara Kopple (NY: Cabin Creek Films, 1976, 2006) and “The Making of Harlan County USA,” in *Harlan County, USA*. My narrative of the strike draws on the detailed timeline of the events at Brookside developed by Sally Ward Maggard in “Eastern Kentucky Women on Strike: A Study of Gender, Class, and Political Action in the 1970s” (PhD Diss., University of Kentucky, 1989).

Fifty Brookside women and their supporters had begun protesting in September, eight days after the Circuit Court heeded Eastover Mining Company's request to limit pickets to three miners per entrance, opening the way for strikebreakers to enter the mines. But the injunction referred only to miners. It said nothing about women. Taking advantage of the loophole, wives, daughters, and mothers of miners had been standing in for male picketers for several weeks. Over the course of the next year, women continued to organize in support of the striking workers. Their club's ranks grew to nearly one hundred supporters, including relatives of miners, women leaders from various community organizations in eastern Kentucky, and dozens of supporters from across the country.

The Brookside women's act of civil disobedience made the front pages of underground, left-leaning newspapers and was covered by the *UMWA Journal*. In 1976 the scene appeared in the Oscar-winning documentary film *Harlan County, USA*, directed by Barbara Kopple. This escalation of the Brookside Women's Club's visibility magnified the strike's symbolic meaning for struggles that went beyond the union and eastern Kentucky. Kopple began filming in Harlan County, a month after the strike, with the hopes of bringing attention to the campaign for a democratically-controlled United Mine Workers of America, an effort dubbed the Miners for Democracy. The campaign's organizers saw a victory in Harlan County as vital; a unionized eastern Kentucky, with its long history of labor battles, would provide a boost to the labor movement nationally. Few would have guessed that the female relatives of miners would become major players in this drama. Moved by the Brookside women's commitment and passion, Kopple helped to make them central figures in the unfolding story of labor strife.³⁶⁵ *Harlan County, USA* kept the women's stories before a national audience for years to come. Yet in the film and in

³⁶⁵ Alan Rosenthal, "Harlan County, USA: Barbara Kopple and Hart Perry," in *The Documentary Conscience: A Casebook in Filmmaking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

subsequent studies of the labor struggle, we learn little about the regional context in which women's activism took place.

The success of the strike hinged in part on the foundations provided by the Appalachian Movement and the networks established since the start of the War on Poverty in 1965. Those networks are important for making sense of women's participation in the strike. In the years leading up to the strike, female community organizers and antipoverty workers had been forcing debates about the coal industry's impact on Appalachia, laying bare the harsh realities of living in the coal fields, where many families lacked access to quality education, decent health care, and well-paying and safe jobs. The Brookside women's campaigns paralleled those of the women involved in welfare rights and antipoverty work, and they established relationships with those activists as they called on them for support. In addition, the new Council of the Southern Mountains along with leftist activists across Appalachia lent their energy to the strike and made sure the story found its way into news outlets. The Brookside women became the most famous of Appalachia's women activists, but the media's narrow representations and exclusive focus on them obscured the ways in which their strike followed a decade of grassroots campaigns for access to health care, welfare rights, economic and environmental justice. This chapter places the women's activism in that larger context.

Growing up in a Coal Town

Lois Scott was born on November 3, 1929, just days after the stock market crash.³⁶⁶ In the first years of her life, the coal operators, who supplied jobs for her father and thousands of other men in the coal fields of Kentucky, reacted to the Depression and an overall decline in coal demand by cutting wages 10 percent and reducing hours of operation. Miners and their families faced steep poverty, and they found that the Red Cross had limited financial assistance to drought victims in regions dominated by agriculture, not those who suffered because of industrial collapse and the lack of food that followed. The United Mine Workers saw the opportunity to act and initiated what would become a nine-year unionization campaign in eastern Kentucky and Tennessee.³⁶⁷

Lois, her parents, and twelve siblings lived in the Benham coal camp in Harlan County. Her father Dave Jones was a coal miner, and in the 1930s, the mines employed him for only two days a week. Lois's relatives kept the large family from starving by sending food. They also provided feed sacks so that the girls had material to make dresses. Dave Jones, like hundreds of other coal miners in the 1930s who struggled to support their families during the Depression, began organizing for the United Mine Workers and soon met punishment from the coal operators. The Harlan County Coal Operators' Association, established in 1916 by local firms to facilitate political control of the county government, including the sheriff's department, kept close watch over any union activity.³⁶⁸ Moreover, the mine bosses employed guards, spies, and "gun thugs" in their attempts to quell labor protests. When miners began organizing for the

³⁶⁶ Unless otherwise noted, Lois Scott's life narrative is drawn Lois Scott, interview by Melissa Scott, March 27, 1995, Appalachian Archive, Southeast Kentucky Community College.

³⁶⁷ John W. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On? The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931-1939* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978).

³⁶⁸ Hevener, 15.

union, they risked both their jobs and housing in the coal camp, as the Harlan firms were quick to expel “agitators.”

When Lois was a very young child, she witnessed the aggressive tactics of the coal firms. One night company guards invaded her home and made the children get out of bed so that they could search underneath the mattresses for union literature. Lois recalled the frightening memories: “They'd kick the door open and shine the flash light in our eyes.”³⁶⁹ Lois knew her father organized for the union, and she feared for his life. Another night the guards showed up outside her house in cars. (She and her family knew they were guards immediately because “no poor people or miners” owned cars). The guards soon came into the house and told Mrs. Jones that her husband had been shot. Later that night, the family learned that Dave was alive and uninjured and was hiding out. The guards had lied in attempts to scare his wife into providing them information about the union supporter’s whereabouts. Such childhood memories, hardened by years of telling and remembering, provided an early lesson for Lois on the politics of the coal camps and the ways in which the coal firms treated workers who campaigned for better living and working conditions. Later, she declared that the Brookside strike “gave me the opportunity to show the feelings, I guess you'd call it the hatred, I feel for the coal operator—for what he done to my father [...] and the family.”³⁷⁰

In later years, Lois discussed the more subtle class disparities that shadowed her childhood and the material differences between the daughters of coal miners and the daughters of superintendents and bosses. One superintendent’s daughter, Marjorie, stood out to her. The girl had “little banana curls” and patent leather shoes, and she frequented the soda shop. On the rare

³⁶⁹ “Labor/Women: LNS Interview with Harlan County Women: Organizing in Aftermath of Brookside Miner’s Strike,” *Liberation News Service*, October 23, 1976.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

occasion Lois's father gave her a dime so that she could buy a root beer and a hot dog from the soda shop, Lois ran from school so that she could beat Marjorie to the most-coveted spot at the counter. She reminisced that maybe she did not have the prettiest hair or clothes, but at least she could outrun Marjorie.

When she was fifteen years old, Lois dropped out of school and followed the paths of many Appalachian migrants who went to Baltimore, Maryland in search of work.³⁷¹ Lois liked school and she was a good student who teachers asked to help tutor younger students or those who had fallen behind. Yet, she had reached an employable age, and her family needed the money—or at least one less mouth to feed if she could support herself. In Kentucky she had worked after school as a babysitter, and during study hours, she worked for one of her teachers doing chores. She could only make twelve dollars a week (just enough to help her buy clothes). Her older sister was already in Baltimore and told Lois that she could make thirty-five dollars working in wartime industries. Lois was technically too young to work in a factory, but she decided to drop out of school and move there anyway. She used her older sister's birth certificate to secure a job in an airplane factory.

Baltimore was an exciting new place, bustling with young people who had also migrated from eastern Kentucky. Lois, who resembled a youthful Elizabeth Taylor, found herself with newfound freedom and attention from men. "Young and naïve," Lois began dating James Harvey Hogg from Whitesburg, KY, a town just over the mountain from Harlan County. Thinking about her decision to marry when she was only a teenager, Lois stated, "If a boy could kiss a girl and get her turned on, the next thing she thought about was marrying him. So I married him, not

³⁷¹ Considered one of the nation's largest internal migrations, three million people from Appalachia migrated to cities between 1940 and 1970 in search of economic opportunities. See Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 20-21. See also Chad Berry, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles*.

knowing him.”³⁷² Lois soon became pregnant, and the couple eventually had three daughters, Tanna Sue, Bessie Lou, and Melba.

The excitement that had punctuated Lois’s move to Baltimore faded with her marriage to James. He turned out to be an extremely violent person who refused to work and support his growing family. He told Lois that if she expected to feed the children and to have a home, then she needed to work. He would stay married to her, but she was not to rely on him for support, financial or emotional. James physically abused Lois, hitting her in the face, breaking her jaw, and eventually threatening to kill her. She was attentive to his moods and learned that when he was “getting one of them spells” she had to avoid him or risk death. Between caring for herself, finding work, and trying to raise three daughters, Lois was stretched thin. Her sister often helped her by giving her money, and her parents cared for their grandchildren when Lois could not. In 1957, Lois, not yet thirty years old, scraped together enough courage to divorce James Hogg, move back to Kentucky, and start a new life.

By 1958, Lois’s luck turned around and she met and married the man who became the love of her life, James Edward Scott. Ed, as family called him, was a worker at the unionized mines in Lynch, Kentucky. He supported Lois’s daughters without question. And, to Lois’s surprise, each payday he gave her his paycheck so that she could pay the bills and manage the household. She thought to herself, “This is the way marriage is supposed to work.” By the time the Brookside strike rolled around in 1973, Lois’s daughters were grown, and she was raising two teenage sons with Ed. Overall, she had found stability in her life, so when the Brookside strike began she had the energy and the time to throw her support behind the striking miners—

³⁷² Lois Scott, interview by Melissa Scott.

even though her husband was not a worker at the Brookside mine. She became a leader in the Women's Club and a national spokesperson through the film *Harlan County, USA*.

At one point during Lois's rocky marriage to James, her daughters lived with their maternal grandparents for three years.³⁷³ Bessie Lou Cornett, Lois's middle daughter, learned important lessons from her union organizer grandfather, Dave Jones, during those years.³⁷⁴ Bessie Lou represents a younger generation of women in their late twenties and early thirties who joined the throngs of protesters in Brookside and, after the strike, engaged a leftist movement that questioned the overall legitimacy of capitalism in a democratic society. Like her mother, she had very personal stories to tell about the abuses of the coal industry.

Dave Jones taught Bessie Lou the importance of unions when she was a child. In an early scene in *Harlan County, USA*, Bessie Lou recounts sitting at the dinner table in the evening and listening to her grandfather tell stories about UMWA organizing in the 1930s. "That's mostly what we talked about," she stated. Along with those dinner table talks, the memory of her grandfather's slow, smothering death from black lung disease pressed upon Bessie Lou. Her sense of injustice grew when she watched Dave Jones, who had worked forty-two years in the coal mines, die from the disease that plagued many coal miners. When the Brookside strike began, Bessie Lou was eager to participate. "When I watched [my grandfather] die and suffer like he did with that black lung disease," she reflected, "I knew that something could be done about it. And I told myself, if I ever get the opportunity to get those coal operators I will.

³⁷³ Biographies of Southern Appalachian Leadership Training interns, Cornett, Bessie, Cumberland, KY, Box 28, Folder 21, Highlander Records.

³⁷⁴ Bessie Lou Hogg was born on June 1, 1948 in Pikeville, Kentucky. See obituary in *People's Tribune*, <http://www.peoplestribune.org/PT.2010.04/PT.2010.04.04.shtml>, accessed October 21, 2011.

Because I thought, you know, [the company] was the enemy. So when this strike came up, I saw the opportunity, and I jumped right in there.”³⁷⁵

By the time Bessie Lou was fourteen, she had quit school and moved to Chicago to work in a factory. At the age of sixteen she married a coal miner and moved with him back to Harlan County. He got a job at Brookside, and the family moved into the community. There Bessie Lou pieced together restaurant work with other service jobs to help support her son and eventually got a job as a dental assistant.³⁷⁶ In the early 1970s, if there were few jobs for men outside the coal industry, women in general had even fewer options for work. The coal industry offered the highest paying jobs, but those jobs were reserved firmly for men. The coal industry, like many male-dominated industries, had been founded on the idea of a family wage—men could support families on their salary alone. Miners, however, often did not receive enough pay to adequately provide for family, and women’s wages were an important part of the household economy. Their options for work, however, were limited to low-wage service work in restaurants and hospitals or in the homes of better-off families. For women like Bessie Lou, the strike became an opportunity to address the near-impossibility of financial independence that characterized most coal camp women’s lives.

Many women faced the added stress of unstable relationships and interpersonal violence. Like her mother, Bessie Lou found herself in an abusive marriage as a young mother. As her activism grew, her husband’s abusive behavior escalated as well. Bessie Lou described her relationship: “My husband said, ‘you can’t go’ [participate in the strike]. He even beat me or locked the doors. He said a woman’s role was in the home, cooking and cleaning and so on. And

³⁷⁵ *Harlan County, USA.*

³⁷⁶ Biographies of Southern Appalachian Leadership Training interns, Cornett, Bessie.

there was a lot of jealousy. If you were exposed to a lot of other social activities, you might begin to broaden your interests a little outside of the home, and see that you had more potential.”³⁷⁷ Her husband’s fear—that women would question other injustices in their lives if they engaged the strike—rang true. When the strike began, Bessie Lou called on the memory of her grandfather who had succumbed to black lung and “jumped right in.”³⁷⁸ Once she was involved, indeed, Bessie Lou realized her potential as a social justice activist and carried her fight into new struggles.

The Brookside Strike and the Women’s Club

In the boom and bust cycle of the coal industry, the early 1970s were considered stable. At the Eastover Mine in Brookside, workers made relatively good wages—\$45 per day. Yet, decent pay did not make up for the fact that they were represented by Southern Labor Union, a company union installed and controlled by management. The union failed to secure medical benefits and pensions, and it made no effort to address dangerous working conditions. Because the union’s leadership had been handpicked by the company, workers did not believe that they could report their problems in good faith. In 1972, the Mine Enforcement Safety Administration found that the rate of disabling injury at Brookside was twice the national average. It documented an array of mechanical and structural problems in the mines, such as “loose, broken, or missing roof bolts” and dangerous flooding. Each day that miners went below ground, they risked serious injury and even death. And over the long term, they were prone to developing coal workers’ pneumoconiosis (known as “black lung disease”) from inhaling coal dust day in and

³⁷⁷ “Labor/Women: LNS Interview with Harlan County Women: Organizing in Aftermath of Brookside Miner’s Strike.”

³⁷⁸ *Harlan County, USA*.

day out.³⁷⁹

Brookside miners grew wary of the constant threats to their safety. At the same time, UMWA miners nationwide erupted over their union's corrupt leadership, which had committed severe crimes and had done little to address the dangerous working conditions that miners faced. An internal movement called Miners for Democracy pushed for democratic reform in the UMWA.³⁸⁰ Drawing on the momentum of that movement, Brookside miners voted 113 to 55 for the UMWA to be their representative in June 1973. When contract negotiations began, they demanded protection for miners who reported unsafe conditions, a pension plan, and health benefits. In July the company refused to recognize the UMWA as the workers' union or to accept the contract, and all 180 miners employed at Eastover walked out.³⁸¹ Eastover promptly hired nonunion workers and, by September, obtained a court injunction to limit the number of striking miners who could picket.³⁸²

Wives, mothers, and daughters responded in late September 1973, and over the year and a half of the strike they blocked mine entrances and confronted scabs, raised money for striking miners, and built community support for the UMWA. On their first day of picketing, the Brookside women carried wooden clubs that they called "switches." The local paper reported,

³⁷⁹ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 310-311; Shaunna L. Scott, *Two Sides to Everything: The Cultural Construction of Class Consciousness in Harlan County, Kentucky* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 54-55; Lynda Ann Ewen, *Which Side Are You On?: The Brookside Mine Strike in Harlan County, Kentucky, 1973-1974* (Chicago: Vanguard Books, 1979), 137-139.

³⁸⁰ Democratic reform within the UMWA was sparked in part after the union's president W.A. "Tony" Boyle instigated the murder of his opponent, Joseph Yablonski, and his wife and daughter in December 1969. For a history of the reform efforts see John H.M. Laslett, ed., *The United Mine Workers of America: A Model of Industrial Solidarity?* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

³⁸¹ Maggard, "Eastern Kentucky Women on Strike," 314; "Hard Times in Harlan County," *Journal of Current Social Issues*, vol. 11 (Spring 1974).

³⁸² Scott, *Two Sides to Everything*, 55.

“What began as a peaceful demonstration ...ended in an alleged brawl.”³⁸³ According to several women, problems began when strikebreakers shouted obscenities at the women and refused to honor the picket line. Some women responded by sticking their switches into open car windows and hitting the strikebreakers.³⁸⁴ After two days of confrontation between picketing women and strikebreakers, the group of supporters grew to include women from across eastern Kentucky. The speed at which women from Brookside and nearby communities responded demonstrates what historian Camille Guerin-Gonzales calls “elaborate cultures of solidarity” in mining communities defined by “tightly knit coal communities, where women’s ties to both men and other women created collectivities that were worth defending.”³⁸⁵

The earliest supporters were women who had witnessed first-hand the abuses of the coal industry. For instance, seventy-year old Minnie Lunsford, one of the oldest members to join the Brookside women on the picket lines, often used stories of the 1930s labor battles to rally supporters. She recalled the times during the Great Depression when mining companies cut wages and fought the union. When violence broke out between union workers and non-union security guards, the National Guard was called in to quell the labor protests. Lunsford remembered that she stayed inside with her children, and she kept a close watch on the machine guns that sat atop hills surrounding the coal company town. “I would put my children to sleep and I would walk the floor and worry about my children’s safety,” she recalled. During the Brookside strike, she worried that the situation could become a repeat of the repression she

³⁸³ “Disturbance Reported at Eastover,” *Harlan Daily Enterprise*, September 28, 1973.

³⁸⁴ Interview with Minnie Lunsford, Betty Eldridge, and Gussie Mills, “Brookside Women,” produced by Nona Hall, Appalshop Archive; Maggard, “East Kentucky Women on Strike,” 315; Ewen, 39.

³⁸⁵ Camille Guerin-Gonzales, “From Ludlow to Camp Solidarity: Women, Men, and Cultures of Solidarity in U.S. Coal Communities, 1912-1990,” in *Mining Women: Gender in the Development of a Global Industry, 1670-2005*, ed. Jaclyn J. Gier and Laurie Mercier (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

witnessed earlier in her life. “We’re living in a critical time,” Lunsford stated as she compared the 1930s to the 1970s strikes. One of the biggest changes in Lunsford’s eyes was that more women could publicly support the men. In the past, she had stayed indoors with the children; now she joined the men on the picket line and helped make decisions about how to support the union.³⁸⁶

When Circuit Court Judge F. Byrd Hogg in Harlan County issued the injunction in September, just weeks before the women began their protest, he feigned neutrality in his statement on the matter. He ruled as though the striking miners and the company were on equal footing, declaring that the contention was between the right to work and the right to picket. He continued, “The decision we must reach comes down to a balance between the two”: the strikers and the company. In Hogg’s ruling, the union only had the right to “give notice” that a strike was occurring, but they did not have the right to “have so many assembled that it would amount to intimidation or instill fear in those who may want to work.” Under Hogg’s ruling, only three men were allowed at the entrance of the mines for picketing so that strikebreakers could peacefully go to work. Meanwhile, the striking workers lost negotiating power and their ability to withhold labor when the company refused to honor their union contract. The major flaw in Hogg’s interpretation was that the striking miners *did* want to work, but a majority of them wanted to work in a unionized mine, which the company refused.³⁸⁷

September 28, 1973, fifty women responded to the injunction by marching outside the Harlan County Coal Operators Association, an organization that worked to make Harlan County a favorable and profitable place for the coal industry. They soon moved on to the Brookside

³⁸⁶ Interview with Minnie Lunsford, Betty Eldridge, and Gussie Mills, “Brookside Women,” produced by Nona Hall; “Brookside Women,” *Journal of Current Social Issues*, vol. 11 (Spring 1974).

³⁸⁷ *Harlan Daily Enterprise*, September 20, 1973.

mine to confront the strikebreakers. The women believed that they could talk to the strikebreakers and convince them not to work in the mines. They learned, however, that the strikebreakers had no interest in the union or saving their husbands' jobs. The following day the women organized their first picket line and carried wooden clubs and walking sticks that they called "switches." The local paper reported, "What began as a peaceful demonstration [...] ended in an alleged brawl."³⁸⁸ According to several women, problems began when strikebreakers started shouting obscenities at the women. Some women responded by sticking their switches into open car windows and hitting strikebreakers who yelled at them and refused to honor the picket line.³⁸⁹ After those first two days of confrontation, the group of supporters grew to include women from across eastern Kentucky who believed in the right of workers to organize.

Lois Scott, whose husband worked in a unionized mine in nearby Lynch, Kentucky, was first inspired to act when her neighbor Pauline, whose husband worked for Eastover at Brookside, told her about the first women's protest. Pauline brought Lois up-to-date about the strike and asked her to join the women on the picket lines. Lois and another neighbor joined Pauline on the picket lines, and the three women took turns driving the windy mountain roads each morning, sometimes as early as 4 a.m., from their homes to the company entrances in Brookside.³⁹⁰

Almost as soon as they joined the picket line, women from Brookside and their allies formed an organization called the Brookside Women's Club. The club was open to all wives of Brookside miners on strike and any women who supported the union. They elected officers, and

³⁸⁸ "Disturbance Reported at Eastover."

³⁸⁹ Minnie Lunsford in "Brookside Women," produced by Nona Hall; Maggard, "East Kentucky Women on Strike," 315; Ewen, 39.

³⁹⁰ Lois Scott, interview by Katie Gilliam, April 13, 1987, Appalachian Archive, Southeast Kentucky Community College.

they met at each other's homes and at the community center. Women used the club to make decisions about when and where to meet for protests, how to raise money in support of the strike, and how to distribute funds. The group helped to pay for prescription medications for miners who were out on strike, and it supplied families with clothing and women with the gas money they needed to be able to drive to the picket lines. Most importantly, the group provided a sense of working-class solidarity for the striking miners and their families. The women stood on roadside corners with milk jugs and signs stating, "Striking Families Need \$ Please Donate." The women always saw the strike as a community effort; whole families were on strike with the miner and breadwinner, and the women expected the working-class community to come together and support the families.³⁹¹

The club advertised itself as a supporter of pro-union families, but not long into the strike other issues began to rise to the surface, mainly the specter of violence in the coal fields. Stories of confrontations on the picket lines run rampant through the women's descriptions of the strike. In one of the early recruiting fliers, the club listed the acts of violence perpetrated against women picketers and union miners, naming some of the strikebreakers who threatened them. They reported that one strikebreaker hit a woman picketer with his car, another threatened to shoot protesters, and one anti-union man shot into the truck of a union supporter.³⁹²

Stories about violence on the picket lines told years later confer mythic status on the women who fought the scabs and company thugs and won. Lois Scott reported that on the first day of women's protests women tried to persuade strikebreakers to stop working for the company. The strikebreakers responded by spitting tobacco juice on women and brandishing

³⁹¹ Lois Scott, interview by Katie Gilliam; Ewen, 39; Photography by Builder Levy, See Labor Arts, item no. 28310, <http://www.laborarts.org/collections/item.cfm?itemid=536>, accessed September 1, 2012.

³⁹² "Eastover Mining Company: Brookside Women Strike," Box 156, Folder 13, CSM Records II, 1970-1989.

guns. One woman used a Coke bottle to knock a pistol out of a man's hands and then hit him with the bottle. By the end of the day the union women had "whipped" three carloads of men and forced eight carloads to flee. Other tales describe women "treeing" scabs, like a hunting dog does a raccoon. Stories of women being harassed by a strikebreaker, fighting back, and usually winning came up often in women's reports of the strike. Their weapons, however, were almost always disproportionate to the pistols, rifles, and machine guns that the company authorities and state police wielded. Women used switches and Coke bottles to defend themselves and somehow managed to win battles with the scabs. In this way, the stories become fables in which woman defenders of the union principle struggle against company forces and come out victorious.³⁹³

Brookside women also hoped to shine a light on the political machines of Harlan County and to expose the unjust operations of the local court. When women encountered the law, they often drew upon their motherly roles to defend their stance.³⁹⁴ In September 1973, seven women and nine men were arrested for violating the injunction. They went to trial before Judge F. Byrd Hogg, who had ordered the strike injunction. During their trial, Judge Hogg dismissed the jury when he realized that they were sympathetic to the strikers. He found the sixteen union supporters guilty of injunction violations, ruling that the injunction applied to women as well as to male union supporters.³⁹⁵ He then sentenced all but one to six months in jail or a \$500 fine. Without money to pay the fines, they went to jail, taking 12 of their children with them. Husband and wife Jerry and Nannie Rainey were both arrested and took their seven young children to jail. Nannie Rainey told a reporter that her only crime was "trying to protect my husband's job." She

³⁹³ Lois Scott, interview by Katie Gilliam.

³⁹⁴ On motherist politics, see Annelise Orleck, introduction to *The War on Poverty*, 1-30.

³⁹⁵ Maggard, "Eastern Kentucky Women on Strike," 316; *Harlan Daily Enterprise*, October, 17, 1973.

added that she was following in the tradition of her own father, “who went through this same kind of battle years ago.”³⁹⁶ News of the arrests spread and photographs of the women and children behind bars circulated through the media, showing up in union literature, regional newspapers, and leftist publications. Following the arrests, Brookside strikers upped their protests in response, leading the judge to suspend the jail sentences after two days (though he kept the \$500 fines in place).³⁹⁷

Throughout the strike women employed language to position themselves as wives, mothers, and daughters who were mobilizing in defense of the men in their lives and for their families. In this way, they signaled that their activism was not meant to threaten gender hierarchy. But as the strike wore on, women more frequently pushed the boundaries of their activism’s meaning, especially as they engaged more direct action protest. Moreover, the rhetoric of “protecting” a man’s job elides the bold actions of women; even as they spoke in deference to gender hierarchy, they paradoxically challenged gender and class boundaries by showing up in male-dominated spaces, such as the picket line, the jail, and the courthouse.

A week following the trial, two important developments shaped the direction of the strike. First, the company called in state police to escort strikebreakers and managers through the mine entrance where the picket lines had swelled to four hundred people.³⁹⁸ The arrival of the police made ever clearer the extent to which the company commanded power and control in the region. Second, Barbara Kopple, a young, leftist filmmaker from New York, showed up with two members of her film crew, Hart Perry and Anne Lewis. Kopple had been planning to make a

³⁹⁶ For a report of the arrests and photographs of the women and children behind bars, see “Women, Children Jailed in Harlan County,” *United Mine Workers Journal*, October 16-31, 1973.

³⁹⁷ See “Women Save the Strike,” *The Southern Patriot*, November 1973.

³⁹⁸ As reported by the State Police, *Harlan Daily Enterprise*, October 24, 1973.

documentary on the Miners for Democracy movement, but she decided to focus the film on the strike at Brookside.³⁹⁹ She and her crew were sympathetic to the miners' struggle, and they offered valuable skills and resources in the form of documenting the action, providing publicity, and offering resources and moral support.

On an early October morning, Kopple and her crew arrived in Brookside and documented the women's first act of civil disobedience, as they placed themselves in the road to stop strikebreakers from crossing the picket line. The police dragged several of the women into police cars and arrested them for "obstructing the highway."⁴⁰⁰ Over the next few days, the crew caught on film the police using billy clubs to pin down men and dragging women protesters into police cars.⁴⁰¹

Betty Eldridge was one of the women who had lain down in the road and was arrested. Betty, a housewife and mother whose husband worked at the Brookside mine, joined the women's first protests after she saw a UMWA rally advertised in the local newspaper. "They're killing us with the law," she proclaimed. While she characterized herself as a believer in law and order, the law at Brookside was "all one sided." This became clear to her when a police officer dragged her across the road, threw her in the police car, and slammed the car door on her knee, crushing it "to a pulp."⁴⁰² She, along with Lois Scott and Melba Strong (Lois's daughter and Bessie Cornett's sister) had stretched out across the road to protest the company's tactics of bringing in strikebreakers who, she believed, were either teenagers who did not understand the

³⁹⁹ Rosenthal, "Harlan County, USA: Barbara Kopple and Hart Perry," 303-316.

⁴⁰⁰ Maggard, "Eastern Kentucky Women on Strike," 316; *Harlan Daily Enterprise*, October 24, 1973; *Harlan County, USA*.

⁴⁰¹ "Outtakes," *Harlan County, USA*.

⁴⁰² Betty Eldridge in "Brookside Women," produced by Nona Hall.

gravity of their actions, or people with mental handicaps who were usually unemployable in the mines.

Judge Hogg presided over the trials of the men and women who disregarded the strike injunctions. He became so notorious for siding with the company and against strikers that he was rumored to secretly be a coal operator. According to Betty Eldridge, he did not like the idea of women participating in the protests or the legal process. During one of the hearings, Judge Hogg called a state policeman before court to testify that young men had “thrown missiles” (rocks) at vehicles entering the company gates. Betty, who knew the state policeman by name, confronted him before the hearing: “Riley, you’re not going to swear against those boys today are you?” adding that she would lose all respect for the state police if he lied. When Judge Hogg found out about her conversation with Riley, he indicted her for contempt of court and meddling with state police testimony. Hogg told her she was a “big-mouth, interfering woman” who was “sticking her nose” where she had no business. She saw the indictment as an attempt to intimidate her and to pressure her to reveal the UMWA’s tactics. The judge asked her if the union was paying her to picket. Betty responded that she picketed on “principle.” To her, “a union, it’s from the inside of you. It’s not money.” The courts and the company did not seem to understand that people will stand up for their beliefs “without [someone] loading their pockets with money.”⁴⁰³

On October 31, Judge Hogg presided over a raucous hearing involving seventy-five persons who had violated the injunction. Three women carried placards into the courtroom. The signs denounced Judge Hogg as a coal operator. Hogg ordered the signs to be removed, but he allowed the women to remain in the courtroom. The women continued to taunt the judge by shouting throughout the trial, and Nannie Rainey, who had been arrested on the picket lines,

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

called out, “You’ve done made up your mind as to what you will do on the eighth (the date of the sentencing hearing)! Rainey and others shone a light on the injustice of a court that favored the interests of the company over the rights of the workers and local citizens.”⁴⁰⁴

In response to the arrests of miners and women picketers, the Brookside Women’s Club prepared for the likelihood of more arrests. Support for the Club continued to grow, and the membership soon swelled to seventy-five.⁴⁰⁵ The women collected canned goods, took up money donations at road blocks, and provided moral and strategic support for families on strike. The Club responded to the situation at hand: people had been arrested and fined exorbitant amounts, the company was not considering negotiations, and it was going to be a long winter for families with little income. For the next several months, the women continued to picket at Brookside until Eastover, unable to bring in enough strikebreakers, shut down the mine in December. Then they turned their attention to the Highsplint mine, another Eastover operation in Harlan County, and they continued to work on bringing publicity to the expanded strike and supporting the individuals who were called before court for violating the injunction.⁴⁰⁶

Issues of Their Own

The Brookside Women helped to garner broader attention to the strike, and, importantly, to their experiences as women living in the coal fields. In March of 1974, nine months into the strike, representatives of the Brookside Women’s Club joined the Citizens Public Inquiry, a forum to discuss the abuses of the coal company. The Citizens Public Inquiry, funded by the

⁴⁰⁴ *Harlan Daily Enterprise*, November 1, 1973.

⁴⁰⁵ Ewen, 75.

⁴⁰⁶ Maggard, “Eastern Kentucky Women on Strike,” 318.

Field Foundation, was modeled after a 1931 citizen's inquiry to investigate coal company intimidation that was headed by progressive novelists Theodore Dreiser and John Dos Passos.⁴⁰⁷ UMWA President Arnold Miller proposed the 1974 meeting and Daniel Pollitt, a University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill law professor who was committed to civil rights and labor justice, moderated the meeting at a community center near Brookside. He and local religious leaders, a former U.S. Secretary of Labor, faculty from Duke University, activists from various regional councils, and members of the Brookside Women's Club joined miners to testify in support of a union contract. On the first day of hearings, miners testified about safety problems at the Brookside mine and the anti-union tactics of Eastover, who had hired strikebreakers and gun thugs.⁴⁰⁸

On the second day of hearings, ten women took the stage to discuss the injunction violations, the violence they had witnessed, and the living conditions in the coal camps. Bessie Lou Cornett brought drama to the hearing when she dared Harlan County Sheriff Billy Williams publicly to serve warrants to two of the testifying women for violating the injunction several days before the hearings. According to one reporter, the sheriff "sheepishly" walked to the stage and handed the women the warrants. The women responded to the charges, stating that Judge Hogg was incapable of just rulings because of his business dealings with coal operators. One of the women scoffed at the judge's authority, asserting, "Judge Hogg made the law... (and we) are breaking *his* law." Bessie Lou then invited the official visitors to return to Harlan for the women's trial "to see justice; see Byrd Hogg's type of justice."⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁷ *Harlan Miners Speak: Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields*, prepared by members of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, 1932 (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008).

⁴⁰⁸ *Journal of Current Social Issues*, vol. 11 (Spring 1974).

⁴⁰⁹ "Brookside Women," *Journal of Current Social Issues*, 46.

The women also discussed the coal camp environment and the poor conditions in which they lived. Before the hearings, women had given the Citizen Inquiry visitors a tour of their homes. The official visitors documented the lack of running water in the coal camp, the poor quality of the well water that served the community, the privies that polluted the creek, and the lack of recreational areas or “niceties of any kind.”⁴¹⁰ During the hearings, Bessie Lou Cornett reported that she had urged the Health Department to test the drinking water the year prior because she feared that the outdoor spigots were not safe. The Health Department documented that the water was highly contaminated with fecal bacteria. Another woman, Freda Armes, stated that at times the water was so black from coal dust that she had to strain it with a cloth. The women then pointed out that, because the company owned the wells and the water in the camp, the Health Department refused to do anything to remedy the problem. Lois Scott and Sudie Crusenberry, one of the other founding members of the Brookside Women’s Club, testified that the company threatened to tear down housing or evict residents as a way of maintaining control over workers. The women’s testimonies suggest the ways that the company’s rights to property infringed on the women’s access to decent standards of living.⁴¹¹

Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz noted that the strike raised not only “a collective bargaining contract issue,” but also a social issue. Wirtz recognized that the women’s involvement brought attention to the strike as a community issue that went far beyond a dispute between business and labor.⁴¹² The women participated not only as wives of miners, but as individuals invested in the outcome of the strike and in the general well-being of the working-

⁴¹⁰ “Hard Times in Harlan County,” *Journal of Current Social Issues*, 11.

⁴¹¹ “Brookside Women,” *Journal of Current Social Issues*, 51.

⁴¹² For an account of this hearing, see Jim Somerville, “Harlan Speaks Again,” *Mountain Life and Work*, March 1974.

class community. In the 1930s, officials questioned miners' wives on the witness stand and focused on the treatment of their pro-union husbands. In the 1974 hearing, women were much more involved in shaping the meeting as they testified as a group, not just as individuals married to miners. The difference in women's roles in the 1930s and 1970s meetings points to how women's understanding of themselves in the political process had shifted in the twentieth century and how women were willing to place concerns about housing, family, and their ability to nurture at the center of their arguments.

One of the goals of the public hearing was to bring national attention to the strike and to build community support for the striking miners. Over the next nine months that hope was realized. The regional and national press followed the strike, Barbara Kopple and her team continued filming for the documentary, and the ranks of supporters across Appalachia swelled. Young leftists and women from across the region flocked to Harlan County. Brookside women became more connected to a regional network of women supporters, many of whom had been leading movements in the mountains since the mid-60s. The Brookside women's colleagues and supporters included several notable activists. Florence Reece, who wrote "Which Side Are You On?" during the 1930s labor struggles in Harlan, traveled from Tennessee to show her support for the Brookside picketers. A network of younger, militant women, who had led a youth and poor people's movement to force the all white, male-led Council of Southern Mountains to address the racial, gender, and class politics in Appalachia, joined in, too. Council staff person Sally Ward Maggard, who would go on to write about the Brookside women, as well as other staff helped to bring publicity to the women in the Council's magazine *Mountain Life and Work*. Eula Hall and the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization also joined the local movement. As Brookside women found allies in these and other women, their activism became

part of the Appalachian Movement to address economic inequality and its particular effects on women and children in the coal fields of Appalachia.

Two weeks after the Citizens Public Inquiry, the Black Lung Association, the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization, and the Pikeville Hospital Strikers (who went on strike on June 10, 1972 after the Pikeville Methodist Hospital refused to recognize the employees' union representation) attended a UMWA rally. Eula Hall planned the rally and helped to set up a Brookside Relief Fund. Hall gave a speech to the one-hundred attendees, imploring the people—especially the women—of eastern Kentucky to stand together in support of the workers. Following the rally, Hall and women from neighboring counties began to show up at Brookside meetings and picket lines. Likewise, Brookside women began to take turns heading to the picket lines of the hospital workers, who were mostly women, where some were again arrested for violating strike injunctions. Supportive networks developed outside of Kentucky as well. For instance, the Appalachian Women's Organization of Cincinnati held a rally attended by two-hundred people in a migrant community there. And in the summer of 1974, thirty-five hundred people from across the country traveled to Harlan to attend a UMWA rally.⁴¹³

As the strike wore on, the women became media sensations. In May 1974 the *New York Times* featured an article about the Brookside Women's Club. The article began by contrasting the Brookside Women's Club with the “gardening variety [...] where members get together and cluck over the shine of each other's china.” Rather, the Brookside meetings led to raucous laughter, cussing, and tales of beating up strikebreakers. The writer Judy Klemesrud, drawing on imagery of uncouth hillbillies, made a joke of the violence women faced on the pickets, quoting women's stories about attacking strikebreakers and singing about “frying up” scabs. Yet as

⁴¹³ For frequent coverage of these events, see *The Southern Patriot* and *Mountain Life and Work*, 1974.

Minnie Lunsford pointed out in a separate interview, “to study over it now we can sit and laugh about [the violence], but really we meant business.”⁴¹⁴

The women did not take kindly to reporters assuming that the good times they had on the picket lines solely defined their experiences. Betty Eldridge later responded to a statement in the *New York Times* article that at least part of the women’s “joy might be due to the fact that many of them are bored housewives who find picketing more exciting than scrubbing floors.”⁴¹⁵

Eldridge countered, “If somebody’s looking for excitement, I wouldn’t recommend going to a picket line. There’s no excitement. It’s just a whole lot of trouble!”⁴¹⁶ Eldridge had little patience for the “New York woman” who demeaned their protests and failed to recognize the weight of the situation: women risked their homes (many lived in company housing), their physical safety, and financial stability by participating in the strike; their husbands hazarded being blacklisted, and the women faced criminal charges for their activities.

Klemesrud dismissed the women’s activism as the wives of bored housewives, doubtless alluding to Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, which focused on college-educated, middle-class wives unhappy with the monotony of their lives. The reporter failed to see the working-class community at work in Harlan. The headline “Coal Miners Started the Strike—Then Their Women Took Over” played on stereotypes of downtrodden, emasculated men. In fact, the women worked closely with the UMWA and the miners in developing strategies. While women’s participation did at times cause conflict between husbands and wives, it was more often than not the anti-union men who mocked the women’s involvement. At a press conference,

⁴¹⁴ Minnie Lunsford in “Brookside Women,” produced by Nona Hall.

⁴¹⁵ Klemesrud, “Coal Miners Started the Strike—Then Their Women Took Over,” *New York Times*, May 15, 1974.

⁴¹⁶ Betty Eldridge in “Brookside Women,” produced by Nona Hall.

Norman Yarborough, president of Eastover Mining Company said, “I wouldn’t like to think that my wife would do that.”⁴¹⁷ Another woman reported that anti-union men yelled insults such as, “If you was my wife, you’d be home where you belong.”⁴¹⁸ From the reports in the *New York Times* to the shouts of strikebreakers, to the bosses, to the women themselves, the meaning of womanhood and the proper actions of working-class women in public was clearly a point of interest, and to some, a great concern.

In spite of her errors, Klemesrud captured a few of the women’s thoughts about second-wave feminism. Thirty-four year old Nannie Rainey, who, when arrested, took her seven children to jail with her, asserted that women were willing to protest and go to jail because they saw “all those women libbers picketing on television, and we didn’t see why we couldn’t, too.” Barbara Callahan, a twenty-three year old woman from Harlan, responded to a reporter’s query as to whether the women were supporters of women’s liberation by saying, “Right on!” She then qualified her statement, adding that she was “all for families and motherhood,” too.⁴¹⁹ That at least some of the women saw their protests in relation to the women’s movement reveals the changes that women were experiencing in how they viewed their relationships to men and how they imagined what was possible for them to do and say. Callahan’s qualification that she supported family and motherhood captures the biases and canards in how the popular media portrayed feminism, and points to the ways in which women envisioned themselves as part of a movement in very personal ways.

⁴¹⁷ Somerville, “Harlan Speaks Again.”

⁴¹⁸ Maggard, “Eastern Kentucky Women on Strike,” 240.

⁴¹⁹ Klemesrud, “Coal Miners Started the Strike.”

Perhaps more than the young, urban, college-educated women they saw marching on television, the Brookside women identified with the women picketers in the 1954 film *Salt of the Earth*, based on the 1951 zinc mine strikes in New Mexico. The Club showed the film at several meetings.⁴²⁰ Barbara Kopple had arranged for it to be sent to Harlan along with several other labor films.⁴²¹ The protagonist of *Salt of the Earth*, Esperanza Quintero, begins as a passive housewife and develops into a leader who argues for women's equal participation in the male-led strike and freely expresses the needs of working-class women. In one scene, Esperanza's husband tells her that women do not understand labor politics. She responds, "Your strike may be for your demands, but what wives want—that comes later, always later." She captured the difficulty that the wives of striking miners faced as they struggled to provide for families with no income. As the film progresses, Esperanza becomes a leader of the women's auxiliary and stands up for the women's right to vote in union meetings.⁴²²

By the 1960s *Salt of the Earth* gained a following as student leftists, unionists, and socialist feminists adopted it and began showing it in union halls, community centers, and university forums.⁴²³ The Brookside women's activism on the picket lines paralleled that of the women in *Salt of the Earth*, as it addressed not only class inequality, but gender relations in the

⁴²⁰ Maggard, "Eastern Kentucky Women on Strike," 159.

⁴²¹ Barbara Kopple's showing of *Salt of the Earth*, along with her general unwillingness to give control of her own film to the UMW Executive Board, led the board to refuse funding for *Harlan County, USA*. The executive board accused her of spreading communist propaganda. See Ewen, 106-107.

⁴²² *Salt of the Earth*, written by Michael Wilson, directed by Herbert J. Biberman (New York: Independent Productions, 1954).

⁴²³ See Richard M. Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History, revised and expanded* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). As historian Alessandro Portelli points out, the leftist politics that scholars associate with movements in urban areas and university campuses also reached into Appalachia, one of the "supposedly isolated and 'invisible' peripheries with no university population. He discusses youth movements that took place in Harlan and Hazard, Kentucky in "It Was Supposed to Be Happening in Berkeley: The 1960s Meet Eastern Kentucky," in *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 199.

home and community. Women talked amongst themselves and with their husbands about how much women should participate in labor struggles, often leading to debates and even arguments about domestic relations. Brookside women reported that they slacked off household duties so that they could spend more time picketing. Betty Eldridge asserted, “You’ve got to have priorities....Something had to go.”⁴²⁴

Through their statements about the women’s liberation movement, their engagement with leftist film, and their protest styles, the women of the Brookside Club showed a keen awareness of broad-based movements for democracy past and present. At the same time they produced their own, local and political culture that continued beyond the strike. Their activism reflected their experiences as women in the coal fields who supported the right of working-class men to organize unions and recognized that the power of the coal industry was central to the injustices they faced as women and as working-class people.

Protesting the Violence of Everyday Life

The women and men who became involved in the strike knew that there was a chance that armed company thugs or state police could fire upon them at any moment. It had happened before dozens of times in coal field labor struggles. When the women began their protests, they believed that they could stall or prevent gun violence by their presence, and spokeswomen for the Women’s Club often stated this message to reporters. Yet their presence did not simply prevent violence; they also drew attention to other forms of violence that they experienced in daily life. Women were especially prepared to confront and challenge authority, for they had been witness to the everyday forms of violence, from being kicked out of company housing to

⁴²⁴ Quoted in Maggard, “Eastern Kentucky Women on Strike,” 237.

watching loved ones smother under black lung to not having clean water to drink because mining operations led to polluted wells.⁴²⁵ Violence and survival existed simultaneously in the coal fields. The protesters knew that part of survival was confronting the coal company and forcing change.⁴²⁶

One of the Brookside women's goals was to expose the company's abuses by inciting their own, more "feminine," and in some ways more subversive styles of violence.⁴²⁷ Betty Eldridge explained the difference in women's and men's styles of protest and what she considered more feminine acts of violence: women pulled hair and usually used switches instead of guns. When they first joined the picket lines, women had handed out bumper stickers. Then they started carrying switches and broom handles with them so that they could strike scabs when they crossed the line. They believed that if they gave strikebreakers "a good whipping [...] that's plenty enough."⁴²⁸ The women used street theater and their own styles of confrontation to confound company authorities and, in theory, to prevent them from resorting to extreme acts of violence, such as the murders that occurred in the 1930s. Chivalry was not so strong, however, that women on the picket lines were safe from harm.⁴²⁹ From the beginning, women witnessed

⁴²⁵ Report from Citizen's Inquiry, see *Journal of Current Social Issues*.

⁴²⁶ On the meanings of survival, see Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 331-335; Women repeated stories of violence done to them and their community often in their narratives. I draw upon the theoretical contributions of Michel De Certeau, who argued that people use story-telling and memory-making to either re-affirm or challenge institutions, to understand how women challenged the company's uses of violence and control. See *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 89.

⁴²⁷ For another example of how women used their femininity to subvert authority in the textile mills in the 1920s, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women."

⁴²⁸ Betty Eldridge in "Brookside Women," produced by Nona Hall.

⁴²⁹ In the *New York Times* article, writer Judy Klemesrud wrote, "Knowing that chivalry still reigned in the mountains of eastern Kentucky, and feeling that even nonunion workers would be reluctant to 'whop' a woman, the women began 'whopping' the nonunion workers." See "Coal Miners Started the Strike—Then Their Women Took Over."

and experienced physical threats. Strikebreakers spit at them and called them “unbelievable” names. One driver crossing the picket hit a woman and dragged her behind the car for a few feet. State troopers dragged, tossed around, and bruised others. One night, gun thugs attacked the home of one family, shooting rounds into the house for ten minutes while Mickey Messer, president of the local UMWA, and his wife and children huddled behind the sofa.⁴³⁰ Bessie Lou Cornett reflected later that during the strike she had been more afraid of getting beat up than going to jail. She discussed the chances that women took when they stood up against the coal company: they risked mental stability and suffered depression; they received threatening, anonymous calls in the middle of the night; and they gambled relationships when some friends turned against them.⁴³¹

The women dealt with plenty of violence, but they also shared moments of joy and camaraderie on the picket lines. The first time the women stopped the scabs, they began singing the gospel hymn “When the Saints Go Marching In!”⁴³² After another successful stand-off, they de-escalated tensions and gloated a bit over their opponents, singing the freedom song, “We Shall Not Be Moved.” The women made picket signs that brought sexual humor to the events. One sign read, “Beware!! Scabbing is a disease which leads to impotency. (Scab sympathizers have a milder form of the disease.” Another said, “Scabs! Norman Yarborough (owner of Eastover) does not have the cure.”⁴³³

⁴³⁰ For an account of violence perpetrated by company-hired gun thugs, see “Gun Thugs Shoot Up Striker’s Home,” *United Mine Workers Journal*, August 16-31, 1974.

⁴³¹ “Bessie Lou, Coal Camp,” 16mm film, Appalshop Archive.

⁴³² *Harlan County, USA*.

⁴³³ See “Harlan Women Confront Duke Power,” *United Mine Workers Journal*, October 1-15, 1973.

A common rationale that women gave for their involvement in the strike was that they hoped that the presence of women would *prevent* violence. There is a tension in this rationale, however, for women participated in whipping strike breakers, wielded guns, and made threats to those workers who considered breaking the picket line. More than one woman shouted in public that the protesters were ready to “fight fire with fire,” especially as the strike became more heated: picketers had been arrested while strikebreakers and gun thugs seemed to face no consequences when they threatened or attacked picketers. When women became more aggressive in their protests, however, their acts of aggression were always disproportionate to the power, authority, and weapons that the coal operators possessed. The state troopers and local judges appeared to always side with Eastover. Many strikers reported that Norman Yarborough and Eastover had a cache of ten machine guns that they pointed at the picket lines. When asked in a press conference if his company possessed such weapons, Yarborough evaded the question and stated that, if he owned weapons, he would have paid taxes on them and that his auditor could answer the question. His auditor reported no such taxes.⁴³⁴ Yarborough’s answer did little to ease women’s fears that striking men could be targeted by company-hired guards.⁴³⁵

The Brookside Women were willing to put their bodies on the line and to risk personal safety, for many of them had stories about every day forms of violence that came with poverty and coal operations that put profit above human dignity. For Sudie Crusenberry, who helped to found the Brookside Women’s Club, past and present tragedies were the markers of her life trajectory and drove her activism. Perhaps more than any other woman involved in the strike,

⁴³⁴ See “Hard Times in Harlan County,” *Journal of Current Social Issues*, 5.

⁴³⁵ The most well-known company guard was Claude Beach, whose court records included two indictments for murder, one indictment for carrying a concealed weapon, and one indictment for grand larceny. See “Hard Times in Harlan County,” *Journal of Current Social Issues*, 5.

Sudie's life experiences point to the constant threat of tragic accidents that disrupted women's lives, reveal the forms that every day violence took, and show how a lifetime of unfair treatment could motivate and shape women's activism.

Before the Brookside strike and the release of the film *Harlan County, USA*, Sudie was like many women in her community: her husband worked for the coal mines; she went to church on Sundays; she tended a large hillside garden and canned all the produce; and she kept a close watch over her three daughters and two sons. She was determined they would get the high school diploma she did not have the privilege to obtain. She belonged to a generation that had witnessed the fluctuations of the coal industry. She had lived all her life in Brookside, where she was born to Daniel Hall and Nora Duncan in 1933, when miners and their families faced starvation and poverty.⁴³⁶ Sudie's father was a coal miner who had begun work as a child. As an adult male he worked at a mine that was walking distance from the home he shared with his wife and children. When a man was hurt or if an accident occurred, such as a collapsed roof, the company sounded an alarm. Young Sudie would run to the mine to make sure her father was not the injured man. On numerous occasions, she had seen men carried out of the mine with injuries and, sometimes, dead. One day when the alarm sounded, Sudie ran to the mine and watched a man being put into an ambulance. He was still alive and speaking, but he died before he got to the hospital. As an adult, Sudie kept in touch with the widow of the miner, who had come to her after her husband's death to see if the girl had heard his last words. The widow moved out of Brookside, but she returned each summer and often visited Sudie. The alarms, injuries, deaths, and the fear of losing

⁴³⁶ In the 1940s, there was boom in coal production and wages rose, but within a decade, the local economy could not support new generations of miners. Harlan County lost 36 percent of its population in the 1950s. By 1960, 58.4 percent of the households in eastern Kentucky fell below the poverty level. The coal industry workforce declined 70 percent with mechanization and the growth of alternative fuel sources. The early 1970s saw a brief increase in coal prices and employment rose 58 percent between 1970 and 1980. See Scott, *Two Sides to Everything*, 50-51.

her father to a coalmining accident made indelible impressions on Sudie and became inspirations when she threw her support behind the union and the Brookside Women's Club so strongly.⁴³⁷

Sudie's worst fear came true a few years before the Brookside strike when her husband William, who she had begged not to work in the coal mine, got caught in the mine during a cave-in. His back and pelvis were broken, and his doctors doubted he would be able to walk again. After two months he was healed enough to come home from the hospital. Sudie worked with him daily, massaging his legs and helping him regain strength in his muscles. Sudie, her ailing husband, and three young daughters lived on worker's compensation, which paid significantly less than the regular paycheck, and the company continued to take out rent for their house. Fortunately, the family had a large store of canned goods that Sudie kept under the beds and along the walls. When hard times fell on her family, she was prepared.⁴³⁸

Soon after her husband's near-fatal accident in the mines, Sudie faced yet another challenge when the family was displaced from their home in the Brookside coal camp. In 1970, Norman Yarborough, president of Eastover Coal Company, bought the Brookside mining operations, which had formerly been Harlan Collieries. Following the trend of much of the coal industry, Eastover began asking families to move out of the houses that made up the Brookside coal camps. The coal industry no longer viewed coal towns and camp houses as profitable; moreover, the small, wood frame houses had become national symbols of poverty.⁴³⁹ Sudie saw the situation differently. Control over housing was just one more example of the coal industry's disproportionate power. Sudie believed that if William had been in a condition to work the

⁴³⁷ Nora Howard (daughter of Sudie Crusenberry), interview with the author, August 31, 2011; *United Mine Workers Journal*, April 1-15, 1974; Testimony at Citizens Inquiry, see "Brookside Women," *Journal of Current Social Issues*.

⁴³⁸ Nora Howard, interview with the author.

⁴³⁹ Scott, *Two Sides to Everything*, 53, 62.

family could have kept the house, but as soon as company officials learned the extent of his injuries, they told Sudie that they were going to tear down her home. Sudie's father, who suffered from black lung disease and also lived in the camp, was also forced to move.

Sudie told her story at the Citizens Inquiry, and the *United Mine Workers Journal* printed her narrative in April 1974, at the peak of the strike. Sudie testified that the destruction of the houses and the displacement of coal miners and their wives and children was a severe injustice. The wood-frame houses may not have appeared special to an outsider, "just shelters from the storm," but, for Sudie, the landscape of the coal camp held a lifetime of memories.⁴⁴⁰ Her husband had been crushed in the mines, and she had known deep poverty much of her life. Yet she had made a home in the coal camp, and now the company was taking that away, too. Sudie recalled going back to the camp and standing in the spot where her house had been. Two of her children, one who died at birth and another who died when ten months old, were buried in the camp cemetery. After the company tore down the houses, they built a road that made it difficult to get to the gravesite.⁴⁴¹ As Sudie became more active in the strike, she always pointed out that the company had forced her and her family out of their home before they had a new place to live. For her, the company's unwillingness to honor a UMW contract and their treatment of families who had lived in coal camps for two and three generations were aspects of the same problem. Coal companies had too much power, and they wielded that power not only over the workers, but over everyone in the community. If anyone questioned the relationship between housing and

⁴⁴⁰ Nora Howard, interview with the author.

⁴⁴¹ *United Mine Workers Journal*, April 1-15, 1974.

union organizing, Sudie put doubt to rest when she covered the walls of one of the rooms of the house with UMWA bumper stickers.⁴⁴²

As historian Shaunna Scott points out, the demolition of the coal camps significantly changed the community. The school in Brookside shut down, families moved out of the community, and stores closed. The sense of community in Brookside weakened in the years following the strike.⁴⁴³ Even if Sudie did not say it outright, she seemed to have a premonition about the importance of the Brookside neighborhoods in terms of labor organizing, class solidarity, and building and maintaining community support for the union and for workers.

Sudie was one of the first women to join the Brookside Women's Club in 1973, and she became a compelling media figure, as well as a sympathetic character in the film *Harlan County, USA*. The media coverage surrounding the strike and the popularity of the film catapulted her onto a national stage. She went from being a loving, but stern, homemaker who mostly kept to herself to a vocal supporter of the union and an articulate public speaker who hosted reporters and activists from around the country and world. While mine workers' labor conditions were always at the forefront of her activism, Sudie's life experiences and the way she expressed her story and beliefs to others reveal the intertwining of class and gender in the lives of working-class women. When she fought for the union and for (male) coal miner's rights, she almost always infused her argument with her own experiences as the daughter and wife of coal miners and made clear that she was fighting as much for herself as for the miners.

Sudie became one of the main carriers of collective memory for the Brookside Women's Club, and the way that she expressed memory shows how she envisioned women as part of coal

⁴⁴² Nora Howard, interview with the author.

⁴⁴³ Scott, *Two Sides to Everything*, 62.

field struggles. She both shared memories of a coal camp life in her testimonies and in meetings of the Club and documented the activities of the club and stories about the strike meticulously. Sudie filled scrapbooks—which she recycled from her children’s school projects—with news articles, letters, poems, songs, images, and memorabilia. Three images especially stand out in the scrapbooks. On the cover of one of the books, Sudie pasted an image of Minnie Lunsford, one of the oldest and fiercest members of the women’s club who often recalled the 1930s labor battles. In the image Minnie stands with a determined expression and a sandwich board that states: “Duke Power Company owns the Brookside Mine, but they don’t own us.”⁴⁴⁴ Sudie also included images of the famous women who had stood up for workers’ rights in the late 1800s and early 1900s. She included an image of Mother Jones and her famous battle cry, “Pray for the dead, and fight like hell for the living.” Most powerfully, in one page of her scrapbook Sudie positioned a portrait of herself, taken by labor activist Si Kahn, beside the song “Dreadful Memories” by Aunt Molly Jackson, the balladeer and United Mine Workers activist who testified and wrote songs for the union in the 1920s. The speaker in the song recalls the hardships she has faced, watching the children of coal miners starve because “Their parents could not give them milk.” She points to the injustice of people suffering from poverty while “the coal operators and their wives and their children/Were all dressed in jewels and silk.” Like the famous union ballad “Which Side Are You On?” this song draws moral boundaries between the coal operator and the coal miner. Yet what makes this song different is that the female speaker brings attention to the families of the coal operators and the coal miners. While the coal operators’ wives and children dress in the finest materials, the coal miners’ wives cannot afford to feed their children and are haunted by the “dreadful memories” of seeing children “sick and hungry, weak and cold”

⁴⁴⁴ Sudie Crusenberry, Scrapbooks, Appalachian Archive, Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College, Cumberland, Kentucky; photo by Earl Dotter for *United Mine Workers Journal*.

who “starve to death and die.”⁴⁴⁵ Sudie found solace and strength in the songs and stories of women who had lived through the struggles of the 1930s, and she related her own experience to that past.

Sudie infused the Brookside Women’s Club with discussions about what was just in a community dominated by a single industry and brought attention to the well-being of miners’ wives and their children. She came to the club as a mother who wanted to provide better futures for her children. Sudie explained her support of the strike, “I went down there in support of the miners, for the miners, and in support of my own children, too, that I’m raising up.” By the time she had joined the club, Sudie had two young sons, along with her three older daughters. She was especially concerned about the future of her male children growing up in a place where there were few jobs for men outside of coal mining. This point became especially clear in one club meeting when a couple of women got into an argument. One woman accused another of committing adultery. Sudie interrupted the argument and emphatically reminded the women what was most important: “I don’t care who takes whose man, who lives with whose man, what they do, they can take mine, take him on, they can have him! I’ll shed no tears. I’m not after a man; I’m after a contract! I’m raising two boys!” Sudie then began discussing her own experience as the wife of a disabled miner, the daughter of a sick miner, a girl who grew up poor in the coal camps, and a woman who had lost her home to the company. In her testimony, she punctuated memories of a coal camp life with the poverty, hardship, and physical violence that existed in the coal fields. As she shared these memories, the pain became so great that she began to sob:

[...] my husband was smashed up in the mine, retired, and Eastover just pushed us off. We was pushed off before the rent was up and all of that. He was smashed up there and

⁴⁴⁵ “Dreadful Memories,” *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson* (Washington, DC: Folkways, 1960); Sudie Crusenberry, *Scrapbooks*.

Daddy is down with coal dust from that mines. [Crying] I went to Ages school. I've got part of the sixth grade because Daddy got eight dollars and something a shift. Nothing to go to school on! Have to go in overalls. And pile out slate for a living after I grewed up, [get] coal out of it and sell it!"⁴⁴⁶

Through her testimony, she brought to the fore a lifetime of injustices that came with poverty and unstable working conditions. Her testimony and memories suggest the intertwined roots of poverty and the particular affects poverty had on girl in the coal fields: lack of education, homelessness, a sick father and disabled husband that required the care giving labor of women in the family, and the shame of being poor.

In late August 1974, striking miner Lawrence Jones was shot and killed in an argument between union supporters and men who had crossed the picket line. He left behind a young wife and baby. Sudie Crusenberry kept a poem that one of the union-supporting women wrote in Lawrence Jones' honor: "you're the martyr, another role you had no choice in choosing."⁴⁴⁷ On August 29, 1974, days after the shooting, Eastover Mining Company finally signed the UMWA national wage agreement and recognized the collective bargaining rights of the Brookside miners. For many in Brookside, the contract was little solace after the murder of a striking worker. Others tried to move forward, believing that Jones's death and the contract that followed would prevent further acute acts of violence.

The Brookside Women's Club continued to meet for several years after the strike, throwing their support behind other progressive, democratic causes in eastern Kentucky, as well as the UMWA organizing drives at other mines. The local male leaders of the organizing drive appreciated the women's support and realized the important roles they played in helping the men

⁴⁴⁶ *Harlan County, USA.*

⁴⁴⁷ Sudie Crusenberry, Scrapbooks.

win a contract, stating, “If it hadn’t been for the women, we’d have lost this strike.”⁴⁴⁸

The women’s politicization during the strike led to deeper changes than a union contract, though. Some women negotiated new relationships with their husbands as they decided to go back to school or start jobs outside the household when the strike was over. At least five women returned to school and two women started their own businesses. Others joined community and labor organizations and traveled to other parts of the country to share their experiences and build support for the labor movement.⁴⁴⁹

The Brookside Women’s Club empowered its members to speak up, act, and take risks on behalf of themselves, their families, and communities, and to identify with and support larger democratic movements. Brookside Women’s Club treasurer Bessie Lou Cornett stated after the strike that the movement in Harlan County was similar to the civil rights movement; some battles had been won, but “we still have to carry it forward.”⁴⁵⁰ She and other women activists in Appalachia continued to work on community issues and to build alliances with other working-class communities and Appalachian women.

During the strike, Bessie Lou had helped to develop the underground newspaper *Harlan Labor News*, “a weapon for the coal miners for defending and uniting the various efforts of the whole community around issues which affect all of us.”⁴⁵¹ When the strike was settled, she continued to organize in eastern Kentucky as part of the Brookside Women’s Club and to write for and distribute *Harlan Labor News*. Bessie Lou’s life more than others provides a prism for

⁴⁴⁸ Eileen Whalen, “Women Save the Strike, Harlan Miners Fight for Union,” *The Southern Patriot*, November 1973.

⁴⁴⁹ Maggard, “Eastern Kentucky Women on Strike,” 243-247.

⁴⁵⁰ “Labor/Women: LNS Interview with Harlan County Women: Organizing in Aftermath of Brookside Miner’s Strike.”

⁴⁵¹ Biographies of Southern Appalachian Leadership Training interns, Cornett, Bessie.

understanding the complications that many working-class women faced as they navigated both class oppression and gender violence, often from within their own communities.

While many of the Brookside women had stable relationships with their families and husbands, others like Bessie Lou lived in abusive relationships that became more volatile during the strike, leading to their divorce. After the Bessie Lou's ex-husband filed for full custody of their eight-year old son, Stephen, and used Bessie Lou's strike activities and other progressive organizing—including working in alliance with African American people in Harlan, and writing for the *Harlan Labor News*—to argue that she was an unfit mother.⁴⁵² The presiding judge corroborated the ex-husband's views of Bessie Lou and took custody of Stephen away from her.

Not only did Bessie Lou face repercussions for her progressive activities from her ex-husband and the local judge. On July 14, 1975, Bessie Lou was arrested and charged with kidnapping a woman and her children. A known Klan member brought the charges, and Bessie Lou was soon taken into police custody. Three days after her arrest, the Klan leader David Duke (who was from Louisiana) held a rally in Harlan and largely focused on the activities of Bessie Lou. A crowd of four hundred and fifty people attended the rally (the Klan had predicted three thousand attendees). UMW observers reported that those in attendance were “mostly scabs.” The main emphasis of the rally was “the drug problem” that the Klan blamed on “Blacks and communists.”⁴⁵³ Bessie Lou had been using *Harlan Labor News* as a platform to tackle the reorganization of the Ku Klux Klan, which had put out calls for membership in the official Harlan County newspaper. She wrote about how the anti-union Klan divided the working-class community, making life worse for everyone. Lastly, she promoted interracial organizing against

⁴⁵² See Ewen for a narrative based on an interview with Cornett, 114-115.

⁴⁵³ “Kentuckians Oppose Klan,” *The Southern Patriot*, June-July 1975.

the “urban renewal” of Georgetown, the black neighborhood in Harlan that was being zoned out of existence.⁴⁵⁴

In response to Bessie Lou’s arrest and the surge of the Klan, UMWA members began petitioning the Kentucky governor to release Bessie Lou. After Lois Scott called the FBI, officials investigated the case and ruled that Bessie Lou had been falsely charged, forcing her release. Bessie Lou and Lois later heard that the Klan member who had brought the charges had threatened his wife and forced her to testify that she had been kidnapped. No one was held accountable for the false charges, and the Klan continued to intimidate Bessie Lou and other outspoken leaders, burning crosses and threatening lives.⁴⁵⁵ In the *Harlan Labor News* and during her speaking engagements after the release of *Harlan County, USA*, Bessie Lou continued to publicize the Klan’s activities in Harlan and to draw connections between civil rights struggles and events in Harlan. She eloquently summarized the larger concerns in her community: “What the people at Brookside was fighting for was just a better way of life, a better way of living.” After drawing parallels to the ongoing black freedom struggle, she continued, “But it still didn't mean there was full equality, and we still have to carry it forward. If you let down your guard and you don't keep up the fight or keep struggling, they can take away all the gains you got. And that's why it needs to be pointed out that the Ku Klux Klan is around to take away the things we won during the strike.”⁴⁵⁶

In the fall of 1975 Bessie Lou applied for and received a grant from the Southern

⁴⁵⁴ Ewen, 115-116; “Labor/Women: LNS Interview with Harlan County Women: Organizing in Aftermath of Brookside Miner’s Strike.”

⁴⁵⁵ Ewen, 114-117. See also “Jerry and Bessie,” Outtakes, *Harlan County, USA*. Jerry Johnson and Bessie Lou Cornett discuss red baiting in Harlan.

⁴⁵⁶ “Labor/Women: LNS Interview with Harlan County Women: Organizing in Aftermath of Brookside Miner’s Strike.”

Appalachian Leadership Training Program (SALT) so that she could network with other progressive people in Appalachia. The SALT program was a response to the many grassroots efforts for social change in Appalachia, and the organizers, who included several former VISTA workers, designed it as a place for local people to receive leadership training and to meet their peers.⁴⁵⁷ Even though the program was not pitched to women in particular, women made up the majority of applicants and interns. Bessie Lou, like many other women, found in the SALT program a space to receive education in organizing and network with other progressive rural women. As Bessie Lou explained in her grant application, the Brookside Women's Club had begun to support coal miners in a struggle for a UMWA contract, but the "goals became broader, i.e. organizing community involvement in struggles other than the union contract such as better housing, jobs for women, education around the role of the politicians, courts, coal operators."⁴⁵⁸ Bessie Lou used her time in the SALT program to explore issues of housing, education, jobs, and safer coal mines. For her major project, she wrote a pamphlet about how nationalizing the coal mines could positively affect miners and their families. Unfortunately, however, as Bessie Lou's activism developed and she became more outspoken about leftist politics, the Klan's threats continued as well. Eventually the threats against her and others became too much to handle and Bessie Lou fled Harlan, leaving her son, family, and the Brookside Women's Club behind.⁴⁵⁹

Bessie Lou Cornett saw the strike as an opportunity for women to "speak out more" and test the boundaries of coal field gender codes. Not all tests turn out well, and while Cornett was singled out and harassed, there was a wave of women fighting the same battles. In the years

⁴⁵⁷ Southern Appalachian Leadership Training, SALT/MCEP, Interim Narrative Report, June, 1977, Box 26, Highlander Records.

⁴⁵⁸ Biographies of Southern Appalachian Leadership Training interns, Cornett, Bessie.

⁴⁵⁹ Ewen, 117-118; "Bessie Lou Provided Voice for Dissent," *Harlan Daily Enterprise*, March 11, 2010.

following the strike, women attempted to get jobs in the coal industry, which had historically blocked women from mining jobs. Others organized women's groups and held women's conferences. As Bessie Lou stated, "The lessons that were learned at Brookside weren't lost."⁴⁶⁰ These "lessons" went beyond the labor struggle itself and encompassed the options available to women in the coal fields and their relationships to men.⁴⁶¹

In October 1976, Bessie Lou Cornett and Lois Scott joined Barbara Kopple at showings of the recently released *Harlan County, USA*. When the film ended and the lights came up, the late Hazel Dickens, who wrote music for the film, played a few more songs for the crowd before Bessie and Lois joined the director on stage to answer questions from the audience. As the reviewer noted, the post-film discussion "focused not at all on the film *as a film* but rather on the content, the issues it raised. People wanted to know what had happened since Kopple stopped filming."⁴⁶² The audience learned how the struggle for unionization and for the rights of working-class people continued in eastern Kentucky, as the company tried to break the UMWA, the Klan campaigned against interracial organizing, and mining families addressed black lung disease and strip mining.

It is telling that leaders of the Brookside women became the spokespeople for these struggles for an urban audience at the Lincoln Theater. The mother-daughter team and their filmmaker friend represented a movement of women in Appalachia, positioned in one of the

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ After the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983, women union supporters (some miners, some housewives) recounted similar personal transformations. See Barbara Kingsolver, *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1996). For some of the women, Kingsolver writes, "What began as an extension of domestic servility became a contradiction of it in the end..." 178.

⁴⁶² E. Ann Kaplan, "Harlan County, USA: The Documentary Form," *Jump Cut*, no. 15 (1977), 11-12.

poorest regions in the country. Using their own images and stories, Bessie Lou Cornett, Lois Scott, and the many other women shared their experiences of poverty, discrimination, and injustice in the coal fields of Kentucky. Their stories point to how specific and local moments of crisis propelled women into the democratic movements of the 1970s. Once mobilized, they connected individual experience and collective memory of labor protest and class inequality, engaged broader debates about freedom, justice, and equality in American society, and broadened those debates to produce a class-inflected movement of working-class women. In the years following the strike, Appalachian women became leading voices in the arena of feminism that put working-class and poor women's voices at the center of debates about gender justice.

CHAPTER SIX
“The Whole Thing Comes Down on the Women”
Voices for Gender Justice in Appalachia

On March 9, 1975, the Appalachian Women’s Rights Organization held a meeting to celebrate International Women’s Day, as women around the globe marched for women’s rights. Over seventy women and men gathered at a community center in Wheelwright, Kentucky, a formerly booming industrial town that had been fading since the 1950s. The meeting began with “The Impossible Dream,” an anthem which had recently appeared in the movie musical *Man of La Mancha* and was popular at political events. One can imagine people milling about the hall, settling in as the tune began with its marching rhythm. A local woman soon commanded attention as her voice soared: “To dream the impossible dream/To fight the unbeatable foe/To bear with unbearable sorrow/To run where the brave dare not go.” The song builds to the declaration that the narrator is committed “to fight for the right, without question or pause/ To be willing to march into Hell, for a Heavenly cause.”⁴⁶³

After the opening, a line-up of some of the busiest and best-known female leaders of the Appalachian Movement described their work and shared their ideas about how to improve women’s lives. Eula Hall, Sudie Crusenberry, and Bessie Smith Gayheart sat before the crowd, three middle-aged mothers who had participated in some of the most dramatic struggles in Appalachia since the 1930s. Eula Hall opened the discussion by describing the goals of the Appalachian Women’s Rights Organization, explaining that the organization “is to protect

⁴⁶³ For a description of the event, see “Eastern Kentucky Women,” *Mountain Life and Work*, April 1975. “The Impossible Dream,” from *Man of La Mancha*, lyrics by Joe Darion, <http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=4727>.

women and to encourage them to get involved in their equal rights.” She then emphasized what she saw as the most significant problems facing mountain women: managing a family on welfare, job discrimination, and domestic violence. These problems compounded to keep women poor and powerless. “I don’t think that in Appalachia there’s anything worse than being poor and being a woman,” said Hall. She closed her speech by calling for women “to fight back” against discrimination and to do so in solidarity: “It’s much easier to combat a problem if you’ve got support.”⁴⁶⁴

Representing the Brookside Women’s Club, Sudie Crusenberry shared how women had rallied behind the UMWA organizing drive in Harlan County, Kentucky. “When we first started we had three members. Then we gathered a few more. We seen it rough, and we was treated rough, but we won victory. I believe in standing up for our rights together,” she stated. Bessie Smith Gayheart shared her experiences as an anti-strip mining activist. She had led a group of women, including Hall, when they staged a sit-in at a strip-mining site. “I was born and raised in east Kentucky and I am going to stay; but to stay here you’re going to have to fight like hell,” she declared. She told the women in the crowd that they were as capable as men and that women could do anything “if we put our minds to it.” Her phrase echoed the statements one might hear from middle-class women climbing the professional ladder or newly arrived in universities. Coming from Gayheart, the phrase took on new meaning: if they fought hard enough, women could bring a strip-mine operation to a halt and effectively protect communities and homes. Gayheart was not talking just about women’s individual achievement; these were women fighting for their homes and livelihood.⁴⁶⁵

On the stage with local women, veteran activist Lynn Wells had traveled from Detroit,

⁴⁶⁴ “Eastern Kentucky Women.”

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

Michigan, to discuss the meaning of International Women's Day and to dispel myths about the women's liberation movement. Wells began participating in civil rights demonstrations in Washington, D.C. at age fourteen, and she had been a member of civil rights and student organizations as they unfolded in the 1960s, first SNCC, then Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC). By the time of the Wheelwright meeting, she was a member of the October League, a Marxist-Leninist faction that had broken away from SDS and sought to organize the U.S. working-class. The League stated in its constitution, "Women's liberation is a component part of proletarian revolution, and the October League firmly upholds the revolutionary struggle for the full equality and the emancipation of women." It declared that for the "revolutionary struggle" to succeed, "the broad masses of toiling women" must be part of the "working class army."⁴⁶⁶ Wells emphasized that women's rights included more than "the right to be mayor"; they included the right to decent jobs and childcare as well. She argued that the women's movement was not about giving up "children and family in order to be free," but about giving women basic economic rights so that they could make better decisions for themselves and their families. Wells passed out International Women's Day/October League buttons, one of which Sudie Crusenberry placed in her scrapbook.⁴⁶⁷

The organizers of the event also showed a film about the 1973 successful union effort at the Oneita Knitting Mills in South Carolina. White and black women workers were key to the union victory, so the film fit well with the broader theme that women were fundamental to economic justice struggles in Appalachia. The gathering was not all business, however; people

⁴⁶⁶ Leon Fink, "When Community Comes Home to Roost: The Southern Milltown as Lost Cause," *Journal of Social History* 40 (Autumn 2006): 122-123; *Constitution of the October League (Marxist-Leninist)* (October 1975), in "Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism On-Line," <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/nclm-3/ol-constitution.htm>, accessed March 6, 2014. For a history of other activists like Lynn Wells, who was committed to organizing the working-class in the 1970s, see Taylor, "Turn to the Working Class."

⁴⁶⁷ "Eastern Kentucky Women," *Mountain Life and Work*, April 1975; Sudie Crusenberry, Scrapbook.

ate, mingled, and enjoyed the music of the Floyd County Ramblers before the meeting closed.⁴⁶⁸

The International Women's Day celebration in Wheelwright points to several themes that emerge in the history of women's activism in Appalachia in the early 1970s. First, the topics discussed reflected the decade-long anti-poverty and welfare rights work of women in Appalachia. Second, the meeting capitalized on the coalitional work that defined women's organizing in Appalachia, bringing together welfare rights, labor, women's liberation, and anti-strip mining activists. Like the iterations of the women's movement elsewhere, feminism in Appalachia gained strength as it drew upon women's diverse experiences and backgrounds. Coalition-building was not always easy or successful.⁴⁶⁹ Yet in Appalachia, organizing around gender justice almost always arose out of cross-class, cross-generational alliances. Third, like black and Latina women, white Appalachian women overwhelmingly rejected gender separatism, a phenomenon of the urban coasts. They focused instead on social transformation that would improve life for poor and working-class families in the coal fields. At the same time, they sought to bring visibility to Appalachian women; they understood that part of building strong coalitions which could achieve gender justice involved public recognition of women's contributions.

The early 1970s were exciting years for the women's movement. Great change seemed imminent. Women's rights activists appeared on television and in newspapers, marched for equality, and broke down barriers in the workplace. The National Organization for Women was growing, and across the country, many local groups of women began meeting and sharing their experiences in consciousness-raising groups. International Women's Day had been renewed by

⁴⁶⁸ "Eastern Kentucky Women."

⁴⁶⁹ See Stephanie Gilmore, ed., *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

the United Nations, which also declared 1975 to be International Women's Year. As the International Women's Day celebration in Wheelwright indicates, women in Appalachia responded to the national women's movement as they defined for themselves the meaning of women's rights. International Women's Day offered a banner under which they could celebrate women's leadership in community organizations, recognize the injustice women continued to face, and rally to unite for change. Moreover, because the meeting occurred at the same time as many other meetings and marches across the nation, it created a sense of unity with women in other places. Yet, in the national memory of the women's movement, Appalachian women (and rural women in general) are invisible. The movers and shakers of the movement were women in cities, where they participated in organizations such as NOW or formed women's collectives, published texts on women's liberation, and gained the national spotlight as they gave speeches and marched in the streets. Less known is how women in rural and more isolated areas of the country, mostly working-class and poor, put the women's movement into play.⁴⁷⁰ In the 1970s, just as in urban centers across the United States, women in Appalachia organized for gender justice.

"Grassroots feminism" best describes how women drew on the particulars of living as a female in the coal fields to address how gender inequality functioned in their lives. Historian Stephanie Gilmore has recently applied this concept to her study of local chapters of the National Organization of Women. She uses it "to refer to women whose activism was not represented in the dominant sites of activism on the East Coast," and to explore the local contexts in which

⁴⁷⁰ See synthetic narratives of the second-wave feminist movement, Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed in America* (New York: Penguin, 2001), and Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

NOW chapters formed.⁴⁷¹ To take that idea a step further: not only do place and issues differ for grassroots feminists, but the very formation of gender-consciousness is distinctive. Distant from organizations such as NOW, women in Appalachia developed a feminist critique from the ground up as they responded to particular conditions in their communities and constructed their arguments for gender justice based on the decade-long work of anti-poverty and community activists and the still older tradition of union organizing.

Why has there been no interest in the feminist activism of Appalachian women? Barbara Ellen Smith has captured the problem of writing about women in Appalachian historiography; the very concept “Appalachia” has been constructed around men’s experiences and has ignored gender dynamics in the region.”⁴⁷² Smith notes that twentieth-century Appalachian history is peopled with populist heroes, mostly male. In this narrative, women appear as loyal supporters and as peacemakers seeking to avert violence between men. To say that women in Appalachia, even those who were devoted to the class struggle between coal operators and miners, created their own women’s movement disrupts the idea that working-class solidarity was the single motivating factor in women’s activism. Smith asks, “How have the contexts—and constructs—of our beloved mountains and romanticized mountaineers constrained women's dreams, talents, and possibilities?” As Appalachian women participated in feminist gatherings, they discovered and discussed multiple layers of oppression. They maintained solidarity with men and promoted a vision of gender justice that included labor rights for male workers and respect for the working-class family and community, but they also revealed the injustices in their own lives, within their homes, families, and communities. Ruth Hutchinson, a middle-aged white woman in Buchanan,

⁴⁷¹ Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell: Grassroots Feminist Activism in Postwar America* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 4-5.

⁴⁷² Barbara Ellen Smith, “Beyond the Mountains,” 2.

Virginia, provides a telling example. She became the first female deputy sheriff in her county after a career as a nurse, and she spoke about her experiences while attending an Appalachian women's conference in 1972. She declared, "I'm all for women's lib. All women need to be liberated. If you're not, you don't know the feeling. Women who sit at home with a thumb on them, they should push that thumb off and go on." Ruth and other Appalachian women rejected traditional roles and revealed desires for a less conventional future.⁴⁷³

The history of the regional women's movements that burst forth in the 1970s is a powerful reminder of the breadth and depth of the U.S. women's movement. Part of the power of the movement lay in its capaciousness, despite the caricatures that oversimplified and made a mockery of feminists and feminism. At the height of the movement, women from various backgrounds gathered and drew from their own experience to speak about "women's issues," always a fluctuating category that reflected each particular place and each woman's personal experience. In Appalachia, working-class and rural women's gender interests were defined in battles between labor and capital and deeply influenced by movements for economic justice. Their visions of justice and their individual experiences of the coal industry and rural poverty enabled them to analyze the abuses of capitalism and the gender inequality that was fundamental to it.⁴⁷⁴

This chapter provides an overview of feminism in the Appalachian South. Feminist

⁴⁷³ "A Weekend for Women in West Virginia," *Mountain Life and Work*, November 1972.

⁴⁷⁴ As historian Nancy MacLean has argued, the women's movement was sparked in part by shifting work standards and public policies that demanded a change in gender arrangements. Transformations in the post-1945 political economy and family structures, along with the politically ripe times of the 1960s and 1970s, made many women in small towns and rural areas throughout the country receptive to feminist ideas. Many women from Appalachia had migrated to cities and had worked in the defense industries in the 1940s, only to return home to shrinking work opportunities for women, and by the 1970s declining wages for men. In Appalachia more than in other parts of the country, women's livelihoods were tied to male family members' jobs, explaining in part their willingness to fight so fervently for miner's right to organize. See Nancy MacLean, "Post-War Women's History: From the 'Second Wave' to the Family Wage," *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, eds. Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002).

strains of thought emerged out of antipoverty coalitions, as young and outsider activists reflected on their own experiences as activists and joined in conversations with local mothers and grandmothers about the women's movement. By the early 1970s, a flurry of reports, conferences, and special publications reveal that a regional women's movement was underway. Women spoke publicly about formerly private concerns, such as pregnancy, childbirth, family planning, and domestic violence, and women's health became a central theme in the regional movement. Local organizations continued to address the economic depression that affected many women profoundly. Taking cues from the national women's movement, they turned to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act to overturn barriers to women's employment and to shine a light on women's low wages. As in the 1960s, women joined multi-front campaigns, but the expanding feminist movement provided a new set of resources for women to tackle the problems of poverty.

Raising Gender Consciousness

Young female activists in Appalachia applied the political lessons they learned in community organizing to a regional women's movement. Many women who had worked for the Appalachian Volunteers in the 1960s had come to understand how differently male staff and female staff were treated within the organization: men headed the organization and made decisions about staffing and funding, and women worked as organizers, while not always receiving credit. To make matters worse, female volunteers, many of whom were affiliated with VISTA, were nick-named "Vistadolies." One woman who worked for the AVs through all four years of college hoped to become a full-time staffer upon graduating, but no one ever encouraged her to do so. When reflecting on that experience in consciousness-raising groups later, she realized that it was not that she lacked the qualifications for the position, but that women had

been blocked from leadership roles.⁴⁷⁵

Sue Ella Kobak also faced sexism within the Appalachian Volunteers, but it took her a while to grasp how gender functioned within the organization. She recalls the time when she and other volunteers met at the Highlander Research and Education Center with Myles Horton. A female volunteer asked Horton what he thought about the women's movement. He replied, with a chuckle, that Highlander supported minorities, and when women were in the minority then Highlander might consider the question. Kobak says that she and the other women present did not back up the woman who spoke, which she regretted later. But, she notes, that experience "jerked into gear" her consciousness of gender.⁴⁷⁶

Kobak began to notice that her skills and labor were not valued equally to men's. She recalled that after working on the 1969 Appalachian Free University until she was bone-tired, a male colleague gave all of the credit to Myles Horton, even though she had developed the idea and had done much of the legwork. She had secured the grant money to organize the event and had driven across the region building support for the project among college students and faculty. She also remembers being passed over for staff positions at Highlander, even though she spent a great deal of time there, labored endlessly to organize students, and had a close working relationship with Horton. She watched as her male colleagues were tapped to lead the center into its next phase. Kobak and many women of her generation stood at the forefront of social movements. As they became aware of sexism within the organizations they worked for, they

⁴⁷⁵ Kobak, interview with author, May 2011; "AVs: Women and Activism in Appalachia," panel at Thirty-Fourth Annual Appalachian Studies Conference, "River of Earth: Action, Scholarship, Reflection, and Renewal," March 11, 2011.

⁴⁷⁶ Kobak, interview with author, May 2011.

used the skills and confidence they had gained to begin to challenge it.⁴⁷⁷

In the early 1970s a cohort of female activists started consciousness-raising (c-r) groups in the mountains. These c-r groups resembled others led by women who had been active in the civil rights, anti-war, and student movements throughout the country. In Appalachia, some of the women had been AVs or VISTA workers. Helen Rentch, who had been active in the civil rights movement in Georgia and later joined a leftist collective in Lexington, Kentucky, recalled her introduction to women's liberation. She had visited the mountains to work as a lay advocate for widows seeking black lung benefits, and she met women who had worked in the mountains' anti-poverty campaigns. They invited her to a consciousness-raising group. She remembers, "I was a single woman, I was still plagued by the idea that I had to be dating and that I couldn't be offensive to men, you know, that you had to be polite to men you didn't like, and that if they asked you out for a date you had to go unless there was some moral reason you couldn't. And I just remember thinking *I don't have to date anybody!* It was *so* thrilling." She soon began to think about the double-duty placed on women and how men's activism, even in supposedly leftist and progressive relationships, took precedence, with housekeeping and childrearing falling to the women.⁴⁷⁸

Young women in Appalachia were also deeply influenced by an older generation of mountain women activists. Social movement theorist James Jasper argues that "culture and biography" shape movements and ideology: "Individuals can take on a symbolic power similar

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid; With the urging of Kobak and others, Highlander eventually underwent a series of changes to make the center more welcoming for women and mothers, and eventually saw females in a number of formal leadership positions. See Candie Carawan, interview with author, August 18, 2010, U-0478, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Helen Matthews Lewis, interview with author, May 28, 2010, U-0490, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007; Bingham Graves, interview with the author, May 19, 2010 U-0484, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007.

⁴⁷⁸ Helen Rentch, interview with author, March 12, 2011.

to that of events, leading lives that inspire others, embodying particular ideologies, showing courage or passion or love, surviving (or not surviving) extreme hardships.”⁴⁷⁹ Second-wave feminists in Appalachia were inspired by the individual lives of older women, and circulated their stories in print and images. The older generation had lived through the harsh 1930s struggles and had organized in behalf of the UMWA, and their stories resonated with a younger generation of women who saw the women’s movement as part of a class struggle and who sought to place their own activism in a longer narrative of struggle.

Helen Rentch remembers that once she moved to Kentucky, she sought out women who “were doing something” and supported their efforts. She saw that “women who were out there, really out there, seemed to be fearless. And I know they were not fearless, but they were standing up, and they needed support. And I couldn’t do much other than find ways to be supportive, but I was able to do that. And there was tremendous richness to my life.”⁴⁸⁰

Rentch worked with Mountain People’s Rights, an organization founded by Howard Thorkelson and several other lawyers to provide legal representation for low-income people. Rentch was a lay advocate, and among her tasks was helping miners sign up for black lung benefits. She soon realized that widows had an especially difficult time qualifying for benefits and began to assist them. Widows often struggled to find witnesses who could testify that their husbands had been sick from coal dust or to create the portfolio of evidence that the Social Security Administration required, including birth certificates, work history, and chest x-rays. Rentch had a car and was often designated to pick up women and take them to meetings where they learned about the requirements for their claims. She also met with women and took down

⁴⁷⁹ James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 92.

⁴⁸⁰ Helen Rentch, interview with the author.

their testimonies, in the process learning about their careers and how many of them suffered poor health, often related to their occupations. Rentch ended up living with the women she met, and she spent much of her time with Granny Hager, a widow who had become a black lung activist.⁴⁸¹

Frances “Granny” Hager was a working-class heroine to many of the young activists in the region. Hager was a midwife and union activist who lost her husband Ab Hager to black lung disease in the early 1960s. She lived on her own in a little house hemmed in by the river on one side and the railroad tracks on the other. Sometimes the coal companies parked their train cars in front of Granny’s house so that when she left or returned she had to slip between cars or crawl underneath them. Her friends were sure that the coal operators parked their cars there as a way to punish Hager for her union activism. But Hager was resilient. She got around the train cars, and she endured direct threats on her life, from arson to a dynamite attempt.⁴⁸²

Granny Hager was a lifelong activist. In the 1930s she joined the pro-union picket lines in Harlan County, where the UMWA was organizing. She bore the scars of those battles on her body, which she showed interviewers in the 1970s as she told stories about the labor struggle. Her skin had been burned, pinched, and cut by anti-union men. In 1962 she helped to found the Appalachian Committee for Full Employment, an organization to improve working conditions in the mines and to strengthen unions through “roving pickets.” Hager was a leader in the latter strategy, which involved retired miners and widows traveling from mine to mine urging workers to strike and force the coal companies to improve working conditions. Like many women who had grown up in 1930s Kentucky, Granny Hager remembered the days when the union was solid.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Granny Hager, “How I Got My School Girl Figure Back,” in *Hillbilly Women*, ed. Kathy Kahn (Garden City, NY: Double Day & Company, Inc., 1972), 39-49.

She also recalled how the unions had been weakened, as coal operators threatened to shut down unless the workers would take cuts in pay and benefits. Hager explained, “Naturally the men would take a cut. First thing they knew, they were down to working for nothing. They were working for seven, eight dollars a day. And that’s the way the coal operators busted the union and got the men to work for nothing.”⁴⁸³

Granny Hager regretted that the roving pickets had not inspired the kind of mass union movement that could lead to significant change in the mountains, but later in her life she found a new calling in the black lung movement. After the 1969 passage of the Mine Health and Safety Act that led to compensation for sick miners and for widows of miners who had died of the disease, Granny Hager filed for her compensation. After a long, fraught process, she was finally approved, and she began to go door-to-door informing her community about their rights. She explained, “I’ve done more work since I got my black lung check than I did before I got it. I have walked in the rain and in the snow ever since I got that check, a contactin’ people about how to get theirs.”⁴⁸⁴

Granny Hager made her class politics clear:

I wish something would break in these mountains. I wish something would turn up, or fall out of the sky, or wherever it might come from, that we could wake these mountain people up till they would stand up for their rights and fight for what is honest and just and due them. They’s so many of us poor people, I don’t care how many big shots there is, if the poor people would stand up, we can run those big shots under the bed.⁴⁸⁵

Her story provided a sense of collective memory and enriched the social movement culture.

After her death in 1972 Kathy Kahn included her biography appeared in *Hillbilly Women*, a

⁴⁸³ Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 4-5; Granny Hager, “How I Got My School Girl Figure Back,” 41.

⁴⁸⁴ Granny Hager, 49.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

collection of oral history that “tells what it means to be a woman when you are poor, when you are proud, and when you are a hillbilly.”⁴⁸⁶ The book and the many similar articles and stories centering on mountain women took on symbolic power, especially for gender-conscious activists in the mountains. Hager had survived extreme hardships, first as a girl raised by a single mother in the coal fields and then as a miners’ wife and widow. Her life of activism demonstrated that one seemingly powerless woman could fight the coal operators and uplift her community.⁴⁸⁷ She embodied working-class feminism, sensitive to gender struggles at the same time that she articulated radical class politics.

For those socialist feminist who came from middle-class families, cities, and suburbs, living with women in the mountains informed their notions of gender justice as they experienced the gulfs between their own experiences and the lives of low-income women in the mountains. Again, Helen Rentch’s story is instructive. Along with spending time with Granny Hager, she worked and stayed with Bessie Smith Gayheart. Rentch was both inspired by Gayheart’s resilience and troubled by the effects of poverty in her life. Rentch recalls:

Bessie lived at the head of Lott’s Creek. She was surrounded by her family, who were mining families. Bessie had nine children. *They were just a wonderful, warm, lively family in absolute poverty.* And I hadn’t known that kind of poverty. My daddy was a doctor, and he got up early, and he made house calls and he stayed late making house calls. And I thought he was heroic for that. Well Bessie Smith got up at four o’clock in the morning to build the fire, to go get the coal, bring it in, and build the fire so that there would be heat when the children got up and she could fix breakfast. And she fixed biscuits and gravy every morning. The kids went to sleep in their school clothes because it would be too cold to dress in the morning. And they were going to school in the pitch dark because they lived so far up the hollow the bus came two hours before school. So I was exposed to what it’s like for people who are poor, but they’re resilient.⁴⁸⁸

Rentch’s story indicates one important facet of the women’s movement in Appalachia:

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid, 3.

⁴⁸⁷ “Granny Hager, In Memory and Honor,” *Mountain Life and Work*, April 1975.

⁴⁸⁸ Helen Rentch, interview with the author.

young leftist women saw building relationships with poor and working-class women as part of their activism. Inspired by the civil rights movement, motivated by a Marxist analysis to organize the white working-class, and empowered by women's liberation, they contributed to grassroots movements led by poor and working-class women in the mountains. These coalitions helped create a regional movement that combined the politics of women's liberation with a grassroots, class-based understanding of women's equality.

In the summer of 1972, the first signs of "women's meetings" appeared in Appalachia. At the annual Council of the Southern Mountains conference, organizers set up a "Women's Tent." It was not the first time that the conference included space for women's movement activities on the program; the Appalachian Free University in 1969 included a panel on women's liberation, but the 1972 Women's Tent had broader appeal, avoiding the use of terms that might turn less radical women away. The organizers had been meeting since 1971 in Floyd County, Kentucky, at a community center or at someone's home. The group's self-description stated that it was made up of native Kentuckians and people who had recently moved to the region, including housewives, bookkeepers, secretaries, teachers, and volunteers. At the meetings women discussed "conditions in the area," including the lack of daycare facilities and quality health care. But the group also reflected a consciousness-raising ethos: "We discuss our projects and goals, but also our lives and feelings. By doing this we have found that emotions we thought unique to ourselves are common to other women. By bringing them out into the open we have gained support and insight."⁴⁸⁹

The women's group cited the Floyd County community health movement as one of their primary concerns. They lauded the movement's efforts to address a slew of problems, from

⁴⁸⁹ "60th Conference Brought Hope," *Mountain Life & Work*, June-July 1972.

limited medical staff in Floyd County to the inability of many people to afford medical care. But they added a concern that they saw as “the base of these problems” for women: that many women knew very little about their bodies, “their functions and their care.” In the coming months they hoped to address women’s health head-on at meetings and conferences. As women rallied around women’s health, they hoped to change the culture surrounding it, from access to reproductive health care to understanding one’s own body.⁴⁹⁰

Women’s Health in Appalachia

Health care access was a pressing concern for many women. Like many other issues it was cast initially as a class matter. Coal operators did not provide health benefits or safe working conditions to coal miners, and wealthy doctors often denied care to poor people. These broad characterizations were true, but they did not capture the intimate, personal, and specific health care concerns of women. Women in Appalachia joined in conversations about women’s health, discussing their own bodies, from experiences of childbirth and reproductive control, to the sense of the mysterious that their bodies inspired. As they joined with younger women to discuss women’s health care, they acknowledged that their sexuality ran counter to the images of poor and mountain women that circulated broadly.⁴⁹¹ In popular lore mountain women were either wholesome, strong, and asexual, or barefoot, pregnant drudges, suspicious of modern medicine, and implicitly hyper-sexual, with a houseful of kids. The reality was much more complex. Some women had more children than they could handle, not because they were hyper-sexual but

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Studies of women’s health care in Appalachia are still woefully thin. The comprehensive volume ed. Robert L. Ludke and Phillip J. Obermiller, *Health and Well-Being in Appalachia* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2012) contains brief sections on “women’s health,” but it does not offer a study or analysis of family planning, birth control, or access to abortion.

because they lacked access to information about birth control. Others were aware of the traditional herbal medicines that their mothers and grandmothers used, but were eager to receive comprehensive, modern medical services.

Working-class and poor women in Appalachia faced many barriers to receiving medical care, and early discussions of expanding health care in the region had failed to address them all . Now, in public forums, women testified that they often had a difficult time getting to clinics or hospitals because they could not drive, or feared being turned away. When they made it to a doctor's appointment, they often encountered sexist and classist barriers to quality health care, including doctors who disrespected them or withheld information. They brought into the open an important topic that had only been peripheral in antipoverty programs: poor women often lacked reproductive health care and access to information about family planning. Through meetings and publications, women's health activists in Appalachia began to carve out spaces where they could speak openly and address these needs.

The Mud Creek Clinic facilitated some of these early discussions. The staff held a monthly family planning clinic where women could learn about birth control methods. The clinic also boasted a female doctor. Elinor Graham recalls that, though she was a pediatrician, she often cared for female patients. "As a woman I had to do a lot of women's healthcare work," she remembers. The clinic also had steadfast leadership in two female community workers. Eula Hall and Alice Wicker, mothers of five and seven respectively, spoke openly about their personal health experiences and the struggles of female kin and neighbors.

Alice "Allie" Wicker was particularly vocal about the poor health care she received as a young mother. A long-time member of the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization and the treasurer of the Mud Creek Health Project in its early years, Wicker shared her history of

childbirth in public forums. Wicker had her first three children at home, with her aunt serving as her midwife. Discussing the mixed blessings of midwifery, she noted that midwives' were more affordable than doctors and that she received care from "a bunch of neighbor women" who arrived to help her through the labor. Yet, some midwives, including Wicker's aunt, were not well-trained and gave women castor oil and turpentine, which were considered cure-alls. The home remedies did little to ease her birth pangs and instead added to her discomfort. Wicker recalled that the neighbor women "held me in bed until I had the baby, held my hands, knees, and feet. I was screaming of course." Wicker had her last four children in the hospital, and the situation there was not much improved. The male doctor gave women drugs that would prevent or stimulate births in order to arrange the births around his schedule. When Wicker told the doctor that she had suffered for two days and no longer wanted to delay delivery, "he just walked out."⁴⁹²

Wicker also discussed poor women's ignorance of birth control. She stated that those who could afford to see a doctor had contraceptives, and those lacking access to health care did without. Charged with caring for "a houseful of kids," women searched for a silver lining and convinced themselves that rearing many children "would take them to heaven," but Wicker knew the harsh reality. The health consequences of sex and class disparities harmed women physically and emotionally as they survived numerous pregnancies and then struggled to provide for their children.⁴⁹³

In the fall of 1972, Alice Wicker joined nearly a hundred women from West Virginia, Virginia, and Kentucky in Pipestem, West Virginia for a "Women's Weekend." Those in attendance ranged in age from ten to sixty. Some ascribed to socialist feminism and were full-

⁴⁹² "Five Profiles of Women," *Mountain Life and Work*, November 1972.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

fledged participants in the women's liberation movement; others were new to the women's movement and came along to see what it was all about. Represented in the audience were outsiders and locals, Lesbians and straight women, mothers from Appalachia and radical activists. While the weekend organizers explored a variety of themes, and provided film-showings and entertainment by female-led bands, women's health was a primary concern. Workshops and small group meetings focused on self-care and abortion. The Women's Weekend could have taken place nearly anywhere in the country, since the publication of the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1970 inspired women to become their own health experts and better-informed consumers, but this conference addressed the particular issues facing women in Appalachia as participants sharing their own experiences.

Elinor Graham was among the health experts at the conference, and she recalls the spirit of discovery and camaraderie there. Four months pregnant at the time, Graham led a workshop on women's self-care, showing women how to do breast and pelvic self-exams. Graham demonstrated on herself, which worked well since she had "this nice little lump" of pregnancy and her uterus was well-defined. After she inserted the speculum, she invited the attendees to look at her cervix. Graham recalls that one "regular Appalachian" woman in her sixties looked at her cervix before declaring, "Well! I've had eight kids, and I never knew where they came from!" "The light bulbs were going on everywhere," Graham remembers. "It was wonderful."⁴⁹⁴

The Women's Weekend was a family affair for some. Linda Elkington, who had been an antipoverty worker attended the conference with her mother Bessie Cooper and her three younger sisters, ranging in ages from sixteen to ten. Linda, her mother, and her sixteen-year-old sister Joyce attended the workshop where Graham demonstrated self-exams. Linda wrote that

⁴⁹⁴ Graham, interview with author.

they “learned about caring for our own bodies so we won’t have to be totally dependent on those chauvinist gynecologists.” The women received free speculums “to remind [them] that no longer does it have to be only the doctor who sees our inner goings on.”⁴⁹⁵

Self-help clinics had become staples of the women’s movement in the early 1970s and were related to the underground abortion services in many of the nation’s cities. Self-help clinics could arise anywhere: at gatherings in women’s homes, off-hours at a formal clinic, or at a conference.⁴⁹⁶ In feminist lore, the self-help movement was born when a feminist in Los Angeles demonstrated a pelvic self-exam in a feminist bookstore. Typical of women’s movement narratives, this creation myth places the original women’s movement activity in a coastal city; it’s more likely that the clinics sprang up simultaneously in many places. It was only a few months after the L.A. bookstore scene that Elinor Graham introduced her clinic at the West Virginia gathering.

In Appalachia, acts of “women’s health autonomy,” in the context of class battles, allowed working-class and poor women to assert control over their health care. Having fought for access to medical care and against class and gender discrimination in many hospitals, some Appalachian women saw self-care clinics as one more way to reject the abuses that they had experienced in traditional medical facilities. By becoming more informed about their own bodies, moreover, they could make better decisions as consumers when they did visit a hospital or medical clinic.

While reports of the conference reveal that women were unanimously curious about their own bodies, controversial matters came up as well. Women discussed the recent Supreme Court

⁴⁹⁵ Linda Elkington, “Women,” *Mountain Life and Work*, December 1972.

⁴⁹⁶ Anne Enke argues that self-help clinics were a way of “claiming women’s sexual autonomy in the public landscape,” *Finding the Movement*, 199.

decision *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion and discussed the moral and practical issues surrounding it. The conference organizers showed a film on illegal abortions and the desperate measures women often took. Linda Elkington discussed the issue of abortion with her mother Bessie Cooper and then wrote about it for publication. Their inter-generational conversation revealed the nuanced nature of the debate. Bessie began by discussing her opposition to abortion, stating that women should not “play with fire” if they do not want to become pregnant; then, perhaps influenced by her daughter, she backtracked, noting that she understood that women “do get in a mess and don’t want it.” She reckoned that “it would be better to have doctors that know what they are doing than to [experiment] with yourself” and risk one’s own life attempting an abortion. “Of course I know [women] run into problems,” she closed.⁴⁹⁷ This example illustrates the power of women-only retreats, where participants could explore complex and deeply private issues from a variety of perspectives and come away more informed about and ready to address the problems facing women nationally and locally.

The women who organized these early meetings sought to spread information about the women’s movement and the women’s issues that came up at retreats and in meetings. The Council of the Southern Mountains magazine *Mountain Life & Work* published news about women’s organizations and provided information about a variety of women’s concerns. Since the Council “takeover” in 1969, women had more prominent voices in both the magazine and at the annual conference. In 1974, the magazine published a special “Women’s Issue,” after seventy women at the CSM annual meeting decided that there was a “need to relate across class and county lines about life as women living in Appalachia.” They decided that an issue devoted to

⁴⁹⁷ Elkington, “Women.”

women “would be a good tool to emphasize the commonness of women’s struggles,” and the editors signed the introduction “sisters in mountain struggle.”⁴⁹⁸

While the editors chose to use the language of sisterhood here and in other articles on the movement, they were careful not to ignore differences between women. In fact, the very idea of sisters in a *mountain struggle* engaged the diverse challenges that shaped the lives of women in Appalachia. But the editors also believed it was important to unify women around common goals, so they chose the theme “women’s health” for their first special issue. Why health? The editors explained that women visited doctors more frequently than men, 25 percent more for their own health concerns and, when doctor’s visits with children were included, 100 percent more often. “So we need to share our experiences in the health care system” and learn how to “maintain our health and regain our dignity,” the editors concluded.⁴⁹⁹

The issue combined women’s stories of childbirth, mothering, and working with tips and advice about how to access adequate health care and how to claim control over one’s own body. The editors set the tone with stories by two women, Ethel Brewster and Madeline James. Both women had large families and were active in the welfare rights movement in West Virginia. Through very personal stories, they explained women’s specific health care concerns. James described watching her thirty-two year old friend who was a single mother die of breast cancer since the doctors had ignored her symptoms until she was too sick for treatment. Drawing on that experience, she argued that young women needed and deserved better health care and noted that too often doctors did not treat their patients with respect.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁸ *Mountain Life and Work*, Special Women’s Issue, June 1974.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰ “An Interview with Madeline James and Ethel Brewster,” *Mountain Life and Work*, June 1974.

Brewster, who had sixteen children (ten born at home and another six in the hospital), described women's relationship to health care: "Ever since I can remember, a mother has been responsible for the well-being and the needs of her children—health-wise and everything else. Mountain mothers has always had the responsibility of the health problems of their children and their husbands, too, really. And they usually tend to neglect their own health, until sometimes it is beyond repair." She connected these burdens of mothers to a need for family planning information in Appalachia. Brewster explained that she had been a child herself when she had her first two children and that she had not wanted to have any more, but she did not know how to prevent pregnancy. Her doctor would not give her any advice other than to take a couple of teaspoons of turpentine. As an older woman Brewster worked for a family planning clinic where she saw that women yearned for information about contraceptives but often did not have the confidence to ask or the means to seek them out. She described helping women whose husbands did not believe in family planning sneak into clinics so that they could get birth control pills. She also provided information to men, offering booklets called "For the Father," that explained contraceptive methods. She noted that more often than not men would eventually come around to the idea of limiting the number of births.⁵⁰¹

While the editors of the women's issue sought to find unity in a common mountain struggle, they recognized the hurdles that minority women faced in the health care and welfare system. Noting the especially dire situation of black women in Appalachia, the authors described how the black population was half as likely as whites to have health insurance and suffered higher illness and death rates, twice the infant mortality rate as whites, and four times the

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

maternal mortality rate. This crisis demanded a continued movement around medical care as a right, not a privilege, the writers argued.⁵⁰²

In the style of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the writers offered information about the purpose of gynecological exams, the legality of abortion in the U.S., how abortions were performed, and a list of clinics that offered abortion services. They also included a section on “Facts for Women” that discussed breast self-exams, the various types of birth control, and how to prevent venereal disease. Recognizing links between high poverty rates and poor medical care in Appalachia, the editors offered information about welfare benefits, from Social Security to food stamps, public assistance, and black lung assistance. In a section on job protections, they reminded their readers: “don’t forget that federal law prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, race and age.”⁵⁰³

The emphasis on women’s health in public forums and publications compelled some women to begin to speak openly about the physical and emotional effects of domestic violence. Stories about intimate violence in the home haunt women’s oral histories collected since the 1980s, reflecting that women at some point had begun to share with others their experiences of spousal and parental abuse. Their ability to share harrowing stories without shame is but one of the legacies of the women’s movement: feminists argued that domestic violence is a political and legal issue, rather than a private matter that should be kept a secret.

Women in Appalachia had long been aware of violence in the home. Without legal assistance or social services to protect them from abusive partners, they had turned to one another. They opened their homes to friends who needed a safe place to stay for the night and helped care for the children of women in hiding. Spousal abuse was one of the main concerns

⁵⁰² “Welfare, Women, and the Health Care System” and “To Be Happy,” *Mountain Life and Work*, June 1974.

⁵⁰³ Linda Johnson, “Alternatives” and Jan Chapin, “Facts for Women,” *Mountain Life and Work*, June 1974.

that arose at the inaugural meeting of the Appalachian Women's Rights Organization in February 1975. Thirty women and a handful of men gathered at the Mud Creek Clinic to discuss women's rights and the need for an organization to focus on women. Alice Wicker was there, and she asserted that "the personal is political" by sharing her own experience of spousal abuse. According to a reporter who attended the meeting, she discussed "critical family problems" and how she got herself out of "an oppressive situation." Wicker declared that there "are a lot of good men in the world, and a lot of bad ones. I've been treated pretty rough in my life time, but that's over now."⁵⁰⁴

Elinor Graham provided her perspective as a physician in the community, analyzing the economic outlines of domestic violence in the coal fields: unemployment and disability increased the likelihood and severity of spousal abuse; women often could not afford to leave abusive husbands; and even when they did leave, they often found themselves in hopeless situations, without housing, transportation, or financial support. Graham explained, "The job situation in Appalachia is so bad. Men here get disabled young. Tension builds up at home. Beating begins on the wife and often the children. The whole thing comes down on the women."⁵⁰⁵

Eula Hall, whose first husband had abused and terrorized her for many years before she found a way to leave him, recognized that domestic violence involved a spectrum of abuse. While some women suffered from physical assaults, others were kept from participating in organizations where they might find opportunities to better their lives. Drawing on her experiences as a social worker at the Mud Creek Clinic, she described the situation: "Day after day we see the need for a women's group to counter the things we live with: physical abuse from

⁵⁰⁴ "Appalachian Women's Rights Organization Forms," *Mountain Life & Work*, March 1975.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

men; husbands objecting when women try to do anything like take a job or work in a local organization. When a woman tried to do anything, she must fight her husband to do it. If we have a group, women won't be so scared to try."⁵⁰⁶

Feminists had only begun to name the intimate violence that many women experienced in their everyday lives in the late 1960s, and it was another decade before a system of shelters for women opened in Kentucky and throughout the Mountain South. The YWCA in Louisville opened a spouse abuse shelter in 1977, and the Kentucky Domestic Violence Association formed in 1980 and began to change the state's laws, including those that shielded husbands from marital rape charges. In 1984, the Sandy Valley Abuse Center opened in Floyd County, Kentucky, offering safe haven to women who had been abused, as well as counseling services and legal advocacy.⁵⁰⁷ But before those institutional changes, many women had to expose the violence that they had suffered in the confines of their homes.

Conferences, meetings, and publications with a focus on women's issues allowed women to have frank discussions about the meaning of womanhood in the mountains. They discussed the culture of gender in the mountains and explored the ways that women's bodies had been defined, treated, and abused. Through sharing information and support women began to claim control over their own bodies and lives. As these conversations emerged, women in Appalachia also began to explore and to challenge the gender of workplaces and gave voice to a class-inflected feminism.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁷ See "History," Kentucky Domestic Violence Association, <http://www.kdva.org/about/history.html>, accessed on December 8, 2013; "CAP's Sandy Valley Abuse Center receives \$20,000 grant from Mary Kay Foundation," Floyd County Times, 9 October 2013, floydcountytimes.com, accessed on December 8, 2013. For an analysis of the battered women's movement, see Enke, *Finding the Movement*, 181-196.

Grassroots, Working-Class Feminism

Building on the momentum of the Brookside Strike and the strong coalition of women it created, 1975 was a banner year for women's organizing in Appalachia. For several years they had been meeting in various forums—at the annual Council of the Southern Mountains conferences and at women-only conferences and meetings—and they defined the goals of an Appalachian women's movement, which they expressed at the International Women's Day celebration in Wheelwright, Kentucky. Ten days after the celebration, women gathered at the courthouse in Hazard, Kentucky, to present their concerns to the Kentucky Commission on Women. The commission became an official state agency in 1970, its mission to oversee legislation that pertained to women and to make recommendations about how to improve the status of women.⁵⁰⁸ In 1975 women serving on the commission traveled the state to conduct public hearings in order to compile information about sex discrimination in a series of categories, including credit, employment, salaries, real estate, day care, and public accommodations. Women were invited to speak briefly on these topics, and the hearings would be included in an annual report and recommendations to the governor's office. The commission also scheduled "resource speakers," women who could provide assistance and advice on issues of the law and education.⁵⁰⁹

The Appalachian Women's Rights Organization hoped to steer the conversation away from what the group saw as middle-class women's issues to the problems facing working-class and poor women in Appalachia. They provided a written statement that acknowledged the commission's efforts, but that also pushed the commissioners to "take up the genuine problems

⁵⁰⁸ "About the Kentucky Commission on Women," The Kentucky Commission on Women, Office of the Governor, <http://women.ky.gov/Legislation/Pages/ky-legislation.aspx>, accessed December 28, 2013.

⁵⁰⁹ Program, Kentucky Commission on Women, Public Hearing, No IV, Circuit Court Room, Court House, Hazard, Kentucky, March 18, 1975, Box 128, Folder 18, CSM Records II.

of the vast majority of the women in this area and to bring these problems to the attention of the public and government officials.” It continued, “These are problems of finding jobs, getting decent pay and work conditions, trying to feed families with constant inflation of food prices, increasing unemployment for them and their husbands, having to fight for state and federal social service benefits and food programs that should be easily available and now may be cut back, and trying to hold their families together economically and morally in a time of general economic crisis.” The statement recognized the importance of making women visible in state government, but clarified that they wanted more than recognition: they wanted solutions to the economic crises they faced and services, including strong welfare and jobs programs.⁵¹⁰

The appeal made one of the commissioners “choke up” and declare that it was “an absolutely stunning statement.” However, at least some women left the meeting skeptical that the Commission on Women had the ability to bring about significant change in the mountains. Some of the topics presented by the Commission simply did not resonate for the eastern Kentucky women who filed into the courthouse that evening. Credit and equal salaries were the “concerns of professional women.”⁵¹¹ Few women in Appalachia could even find opportunities for well-paid employment, and they were not considered for industrial jobs, the highest paying jobs in the region. As Sally Maggard reported, “When women brought up problems in getting jobs in heavy industry, the Commission members were surprised. Although jobs in coal mines are about the only way people in the area can earn a high standard of living, the Commission members had not expected women want these jobs.”⁵¹² The Appalachian Women’s Rights Organization summed

⁵¹⁰ Sally Ward Maggard, “Women’s Hearings Held at Hazard, KY” and Appalachian Women’s Rights Organization, “Women’s Statements on Problems in East Kentucky, *Mountain Life and Work*, April 1975.

⁵¹¹ Newsletter, Appalachian Women’s Rights Organization, n.d., Box 128, Folder 16, CSM Records II.

⁵¹² Ibid.

up the meeting: The Commission could not “offer many concrete suggestions to the problems presented to them, the problems of the majority of the women in the area who are in the working class or trying to support their families on a fixed income.”⁵¹³

Tensions between middle-class and working-class white feminists were not rare in the 1970s. As historian Dorothy Sue Cobble has shown in her study of feminism in the labor movement, labor women often rejected a narrow focus on gender, convinced that issues of class and race were at least as important.⁵¹⁴ The Appalachian Women’s Rights Organization pointed to the multiple sources of inequality that women and their families faced, calling for stronger unions and secure male employment, more career opportunities for women, affordable daycare, and a strong social safety net. While they were concerned about problems that affected women specifically, such as emotional and physical abuse from spouses, they did not separate that issue from the daily injustices experienced by both men and women. Gender equality in salaries or receiving credit were not going to help raise the status of working-class women; as women in the mountains had shown over the past decade, multi-pronged efforts were needed to fundamentally change their lives.

That is not to say that women in the mountains rejected wholesale the feminism they associated with middle-class women. Like many of their professional sisters, they began to use affirmative action to bring gender equality to the workplace and to institute gender-neutral practices in hiring. Most notably, in 1974 a handful of women in eastern Kentucky sought jobs in the coal mines, declaring that they had as much a right as any man to a skilled, high-paying job. They were a part of a widespread movement of women across the country that used Title VII of

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Cobble states, “In some eras and for some people, class or race inequalities may emerge as more problematic or more in need of resolution than gender inequities,” *The Other Women’s Movement*, 7, 223.

the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to challenge sex discrimination in the workplace. Women in pink-collar jobs, especially clerical work (one of the most sex-segregated types of work), demanded equal pay for work of equal value. Others questioned the logic that some jobs were naturally masculine while others were feminine. Propelled by the momentum of the women's movement, they applied for jobs as steel workers, firefighters, construction workers, and coal miners. These were not quiet gestures. Many of the women who applied for these jobs—and who often were quickly rejected by the companies—took their stories to the media, built coalitions with women supporters, sought lawyers to represent their cases, and eventually made progress.⁵¹⁵

On the heels of the Brookside Strike in Harlan County, a handful of women took, as Bessie Lou Cornett phrased it, “the lessons that were learned at Brookside ” to heart and applied them to their own working lives.⁵¹⁶ Young women especially had been changed by the strike; they were sick and tired of the way the coal industry treated miners, and they were unwilling to go back to life as it was before the strike, when their primary role was as a miner's wife and caregiver. Some women applied for jobs at unionized mines, and when turned away because of their sex, fought court battles over the rights of women to be equally considered for jobs in the mines.

Several factors contributed to the small but highly significant wave of women who applied for jobs in the mines in Kentucky in the mid-1970s. First, the Kentucky Human Rights Commission, which had formed in 1960 to desegregate public accommodations and promote fair housing, began to address sex discrimination. In 1974, the Commission oversaw the addition of a

⁵¹⁵ For a history of affirmative action efforts, see Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), and “The Hidden History of Affirmative Action: Working Women's Struggles in the 1970s and the Gender of Class,” *Feminist Studies* 25 (Spring 1999).

⁵¹⁶ “Labor/Women: LNS Interview with Harlan County Women: Organizing in Aftermath of Brookside Miner's Strike.”

clause to the Kentucky Civil Rights Act (1966) that prohibited sex discrimination in credit, insurance, and public accommodations. By 1975 the Kentucky General Assembly also replaced gendered phrases in Kentucky statutes (women, men, wives, husbands, etc.) with gender neutral language. It began to accept sex discrimination cases, investigated companies charged with it, and negotiated with companies on behalf of women. Several of the women who challenged sex discrimination in hiring at coal mines contacted the Commission to file complaints, leading to negotiations and public hearings.⁵¹⁷ Second, women spread word of legal challenges to discrimination in employment through informal and organizational networks, prompting many to test the employers in their own communities. For instance, the Appalachian Women's Rights Organization helped to promote the idea of women coal miners in public hearings and meetings where they called for increased job opportunities for women. In their newsletter, they recruited women to apply for jobs, stating "we would like to encourage and support any woman interested in applying for a job in the mines," and pointed especially to newly built mine complexes that had refused to take applications from women.⁵¹⁸

In September 1975, the Kentucky Human Rights Commission held a series of public hearings on sex discrimination in the mines. The Appalachian Women's Rights Organization was on hand with other progressive groups to leaflet and bring attention to workplace discrimination against women and minorities. Earlier in the year, four women had filed complaints with the Kentucky Human Rights Commission. Three white women, Melba Strong (daughter of Lois Scott and sister of Bessie Lou Cornett), Cindy Williams, and Deborah Hall,

⁵¹⁷ "Timeline," Kentucky Commission on Human Rights, <http://www.kchr.ky.gov/kchr1970.htm>, accessed January 1, 2014.

⁵¹⁸ Newsletter, Appalachian Women's Rights Organization.

and one black woman, Joetta Ann Gist, applied for positions at Harlan County mines, which were still notorious in the aftermath of the Brookside Strike.⁵¹⁹

Challenging the gender division of labor in the mines questioned the whole fabric of the coal field political economy. With the exception of war time work and some family-owned operations, industrial mining had always been closed to women; they were turned away from underground production jobs and also had a difficult time securing positions as secretaries and clerks.⁵²⁰ Moreover, the coal industry strictly adhered to ideals of gender behavior: while men performed public work for wages, women were in charge of the reproductive labor of caring for children, the elderly, and disabled. As women sought jobs in the mines, they encountered and challenged “age old superstitions about women in the mines bringing ‘bad luck’” and coal companies’ insistence that “women did not want to work in the mines.”⁵²¹

About a year after the group of Kentucky women challenged hiring practices in coal mines, the Kentucky Human Rights Commission represented them and put in place a template for making broader changes in the mines. The Commission reported that settlements with two coal companies in 1976 were “expected to have far-reaching effects on opening of mining jobs to women in the state’s coal industry.” One company agreed to hire one woman for every three men

⁵¹⁹ “Women Fight for Jobs in Coal Fields,” September 1975. See also “Women Seek Jobs in Kentucky Coal Mines,” *Mountain Life and Work*, May 1975.

⁵²⁰ In 1977, 98.7 percent of all people working in the coal industry were men. See Betty Jean Hall, “Women Miners Can Dig It, Too!” in *Communities in Economic Crisis: Appalachia and the South*, ed. John Gaventa, Barbara Ellen Smith, and Alex Willingham (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 54.

⁵²¹ “Commission’s class action approval in Pyro Mining case marks breakthrough for coal mining women,” *Human Rights Report*, Kentucky Commission on Human Rights, October 1981. Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 160; Moore, “Introduction,” xxvi-xxxii. Moore describes the history of social taboos in the mining industry: as coal mining was industrialized in the late 19th century and the higher wages attracted more men, women were pushed out of the mines. Along with social taboos, nations began passing laws to ban women from employment in the mines. A British law excluded women from the mines, citing dangerous conditions, in 1842. In the United States coal development became more formalized at the end of the 19th century, and along with the growth of the industry, states began banning women from employment in mines. While many women did enter the mines during the World Wars, they lost those jobs once men returned from war, as coal companies dismissed female workers.

until the number of females reached 20 per cent of the non-clerical workforce. Another, International Harvester's Wisconsin Steel Coal Mine in Benham, Kentucky, paid back wages to Cindy Williams who had been a guest speaker at an Appalachian Women's Rights Organization meeting a year earlier.⁵²² She and another woman had applied at three different mines, saying that they wanted "to find decent-paying jobs with benefits." They had both been waitresses, working six to seven days a week for 90 cents an hour.⁵²³ Williams' two-year struggle led to a conciliation that included the granting of seniority based on the date that she applied for a job and an invitation for twenty-seven women who had applied for positions at the mine to renew their applications with the company.

The Kentucky Commission on Human Rights also made headway in the case against U.S. Steel, which resulted from complaints by Melba Strong and Joetta Ann Gist. Gist's case also brought to light the multiple forms of discrimination faced by black women when they applied for traditionally male employment in which the majority of underground workers were male and the clerical workers were white men and women. Gist charged that the U.S. Steel Company in Harlan County denied her a clerical position due to her race and rejected her application for underground work because of her sex. The Commission ordered the company to pay Gist back wages from the date she had applied to work as a teletype operator (January 1975) until she was eventually hired in September. They also issued an order requiring the company "to implement an affirmative action plan for increased employment of women in mining jobs."⁵²⁴ U.S. Steel appealed the implementation plan that called for one woman to be hired for every four men in

⁵²² "Nearly \$45,000 in back wages paid to women in coal mining cases," *Human Rights Report*, November 1976.

⁵²³ "Women Seek Jobs in Kentucky Coal Mines," *Mountain Life and Work*, May 1975.

⁵²⁴ "Nearly \$45,000 in back wages paid to women in coal mining cases."

production positions, and for one African American to be hired for every two white people hired for clerical positions, but the Harlan Circuit Court upheld the decision in 1981. The series of cases in the mid-1970s set the stage for the first class action lawsuit filed by women against a mining company in Kentucky.”⁵²⁵

The handful of women who applied for mining jobs in 1975 were among the first in the mountains to use Title VII of the Civil Rights Act to fight against sex discrimination; their early efforts were a part of an upsurge of such challenges. Between 1975 and 1985 the Kentucky Human Rights Commission facilitated conciliation efforts for complaints brought by thirty-four women against eleven different companies. Six major coal companies in Kentucky agreed to affirmative action plans and by 1984 Kentucky companies had hired 791 women miners, compared to zero in 1973.

The Coal Employment Project (CEP), which formed in 1977, also challenged gender barriers in traditionally male employment through highly organized legal and public relations campaigns. Betty Jean Hall, a lawyer who had worked for the Appalachian Regional Commission in the 1960s, found her way to supporting women coal miners through a legal aid society in eastern Tennessee. She also worked with the Kentucky Commission in identifying women who had been turned away from the Peabody Coal Company, which had federal contracts, in hopes of gaining momentum at the federal level. Fifteen women had filed complaints against Peabody with the Commission, prompting Hall and the CEP to file suit with the U.S. Labor Department of Federal Contract Compliance, an office created by the Carter Administration to force companies with federal contracts to follow new anti-discrimination regulations. The company refused to admit to discrimination, but it agreed to pay \$500,000 in

⁵²⁵ “Commission’s class action approval in Pyro Mining case marks breakthrough for coal mining women,” *Human Rights Report*.

settlements and implemented new hiring practices: one woman for every three inexperienced men. They agreed to recruit women from a list of 500 who had applied for jobs but had been passed over for male workers.⁵²⁶

Along with helping women secure employment in the mines, the CEP assisted women who filed sexual harassment charges, provided safety training and advocacy, supported health and safety studies, and helped women miners' support groups through newsletters, conferences, and "support teams." Women miners followed the pattern set by the War on Poverty, using federal legislation and grants as leverage to knock down barriers. Moreover, as historian Nancy MacLean has argued, single mothers across the country sought employment in nontraditional, high-wage work as one more tactic in a range of antipoverty efforts.⁵²⁷

The Coal Employment Project was among several organizations in the Appalachian South that focused on economic hardship in the lives of women and sought to empower women to secure education and employment. In the 1980s, these grassroots and regionally-based organizations helped to extend the reach of the War on Poverty. They used the momentum of federal policies and resources, from legislation on discrimination to CETA grants, to channel resources and information to women and women's groups. In turn, those resources boosted the regional women's movement and helped to give rise to regional and local organizations that sought to address the needs of working-class women in an economically depressed area. The organizations ranged from those that addressed women's access to employment to those that provided women with leadership training so that they could effectively campaign for equality.

⁵²⁶ Jenny Montgomery, "Women Miners: Complaints of sex discrimination force coal industry to end 'male only' tradition," Staff Report, 86-4, Kentucky Commission Human Rights, September 24, 1986, Kentucky Documents, Government Documents Dept., University of Louisville Libraries.

⁵²⁷ MacLean, "The Hidden History of Affirmative Action: Working Women's Struggles in the 1970s and the Gender of Class." See also Suzanne E. Tallichet, *Daughters of the Mountain: Women Coal Miners in Central Appalachia*.

Affiliated with the Highlander Research and Education Center and funded by the Ford Foundation, the Southern Appalachian Leadership Training program (SALT) was not on the face of it a women's organization, but women made up the majority of its applicants and participants. A group of activists from Appalachia, "who had been involved in the struggles of the sixties," organized the program in 1975. Evaluating both the strengths and weaknesses of the War on Poverty, their underlying belief was that "those who are the victims of Appalachia's many well-reported problems have the greatest stake in—and the most important contribution to make—toward their resolution." Carrying forward the principle of "maximum feasible participation," the program staff selected fellows and provided them with training so that they could contribute to the "decision-making processes that affect their lives."⁵²⁸ The program supported grassroots organizing of women in the South and Appalachia and provided a forum where they could share their experiences and learn from each other. Among early recruits to the program was Bessie Lou Cornett, who looked for ways to continue her work for miners' and workers' rights after the Brookside Strike. During her fellowship year she wrote a report on the benefits of a nationalized mining system and networked with other activists in the region.

Women who had been directly involved in antipoverty projects looked to SALT as a way to continue their work. For instance, Viola Cleveland, a single black mother with six dependents, applied for a fellowship so that she could "travel and meet other black women in my area and other areas and plan strategies that deal with black women on a national basis." Cleveland had grown up between the coal fields and Detroit, Michigan, moving around with her father, a miner and union organizer. As a young woman she married and settled in eastern Kentucky and had ten children. After she and her husband divorced, she enrolled in a GED program and by 1968 found employment in antipoverty programs: working for a community action agency, serving as

⁵²⁸ "Cleveland, Viola, Middlesboro, KY," Box 28, Folder 28/13, Highlander Records.

secretary for the Kentucky Poor People's Commission and on the board of directors of the Black Appalachian Commission (both associated with the Council of the Southern Mountains), and acting as a member of the Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization. In the early 70s she gave up her position at the Bell-Whitley County Community Action Agency, citing political pressures and suggesting that racial prejudices hindered her ability to perform her job adequately. Upon quitting her job she received public assistance from AFDC and sought fellowship opportunities with social justice organizations by 1977. Her main lay in promoting affirmative action and helping black women advance in the labor market. She hoped to find opportunities to share her experiences and to investigate "how poverty and despair plays a major part in black women's lives as well as poor white women."⁵²⁹

Leslie Lilly, a single white mother who had worked a series of service and factory jobs, worked in a VISTA program in Georgia before becoming staff at SALT in 1975. Lilly used her position to network with women in the mountains of Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia, and she came to believe that women in Appalachia needed a regional organization that could provide a collective voice for women seeking economic gains. As Lilly noted, the women's movement often seemed closed off to blue-collar women, and she believed that a localized women's organization could provide "a conduit" to the greater women's movement.⁵³⁰ Drawing on her conversations with women she had met through the SALT program and inspired by the success of the Coal Employment Project, Lilly organized a meeting at the Highlander Center in 1979 that brought together sixty representatives from organizations advocating for rural, working-class women. That meeting led to the formation of the Southeast Women's

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

⁵³⁰ Katarina Keane, "Second-Wave Feminism in the American South, 1965-1980" (PhD Diss., University of Maryland, 2009), 85.

Employment Coalition (SWEC).⁵³¹ While the organization originally focused on Appalachia, it soon expanded across the South.⁵³²

A fusion of fourteen organizations, SWEC offered leadership training, encouraged women to apply for nontraditional jobs, and studied issues such as child care, comparable worth, and affirmative action. As Leslie Lilly remembered, conditions were ripe for such an organization. Women in Appalachia had proven that they were leaders and “risk-takers,” willing “to stick their necks out for the principles of equality in which they believed.” While they were encouraged by the national feminist movement, it had not yet produced significant “economic gains for blue-collar workers” and so “women in the mountains saw themselves as pioneers.”⁵³³

Lilly also pointed to public policy that furthered the development of a regional women’s movement. For instance, President Jimmy Carter and his administration built on the anti-discrimination laws of the War on Poverty when they required businesses with federal contracts to adopt equitable hiring practices. Federal courts and human rights commissions had won several anti-discrimination cases and helped to set important precedents. Lilly also cited the influx of private funds, from the Ms. Foundation and Ford Foundation, among others, that supported the Coalition.

Even as SWEC built on legacies of the War on Poverty, its organizers sought to make visible the blind spots of antipoverty programs, especially those in the jobs programs. In a speech in 1980, Lilly argued that despite massive efforts, women in Appalachia remained “among the poorest, most underemployed women in the country.” The problem, as Lilly saw it, was that

⁵³¹ Chris Weiss, “Appalachian Women Fight Back: Organizational Approaches to Nontraditional Job Advocacy,” in *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change*, ed. Stephen L. Fisher (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 154-155; Keane, 85.

⁵³² Keane, 61-64.

⁵³³ Weiss, “Appalachian Women Fight Back,” 155.

development policies in Appalachia had continued to focus on men as the breadwinners and “failed miserably to address the needs of women in Appalachia, that like women nationwide, have become an integral part of bringing home the bacon.” Despite their important role in providing household income, working-class women were confined to segregated, female-dominated jobs that paid low wages. Lilly argued for policies that addressed “job equity and economic opportunity” for working-class and rural women.⁵³⁴

Economic development programs, many led by former SALT fellows, cropped up throughout Appalachia in the 1980s. Women’s Work World in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, had a mission similar to the Coal Employment Project, as it sought to recruit women for traditionally male work and gave them the support and training they needed to pursue careers. In Jellico, Tennessee, on the Kentucky/Tennessee border and high in the Cumberland Mountains, a coalition of women’s group started Mountain Women’s Exchange, which ran small non-profits and founded a GED and college program for area women. In southwestern Virginia, women led economic development efforts in the Ivanhoe Civic League after local mines and factories shut down. These and other organizations fought to extend the promises of the War on Poverty, often building on networks and organizations in place since the 1960s, and they did so with gender justice at the core of their mission.⁵³⁵

⁵³⁴ Leslie Lilly, “Bringing Sister Home: The Fight for Job Equity in Appalachia,” February 14, 1980, Box 2, Folder 2, Helen Matthews Lewis Papers, 1894-2000, Collection 103A, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University.

⁵³⁵ See Mary Ann Hinsdale, Helen M. Lewis, and S. Maxine Waller, *It Comes from the People: Community Development and Local Theology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Chris Weiss, “Organizing Women for Local Economic Development,” *Communities in Economic Crisis: Appalachia and the South*, ed. John Gaventa et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); “Claiming Our Economic History, Jellico, Tennessee,” Oral Histories by class participants of “Community Development and the Economy,” Sociology 410, A project of the Rural Community Education Cooperative, Mountain Women’s Exchange, Jellico, Tennessee, published by Highlander Research and Education Center.

Between 1975 and 1980 women in Appalachia demonstrated that they had a vested interest in the direction of the American women's movement. In regional meetings and organizations they debated and discussed cultural changes, from the widespread acceptance of birth control and the legalization of abortion to the role of women in households and workplaces. Building on the legacies of the War on Poverty, they battled against the pernicious effects of sex, race, and class discrimination in a rural, economically depressed region. A small but vocal cohort of working women gained access to traditionally-male employment, bulldozing gender stereotypes along the way. Their stories have mostly been forgotten in recent narratives, but at the time they were often in the spotlight. For instance, Eula Hall, alongside feminist leader Betty Friedan, received the American Public Health Association Award for public service in 1975 and years later declared that she was "one of those" feminists.⁵³⁶ Women coal miners showed up in *Ms. Magazine* and on nationally televised programs, becoming working-class heroines of second-wave feminism. They found supporters in the National Organization for Women and feminist Gloria Steinem, and they marched alongside feminists of all stripes as they campaigned for the Equal Rights Amendment in Washington, D.C.⁵³⁷

Appalachian women used federal and state policies to help overturn the gender injustices of the past, and they paved the way for services and rights that many take for granted today. For instance, taking advantage of federal grants, local women's groups in the mountains were among the first to implement pilot maternal and infant health community health programs, which offered support services for new mothers, information about contraception and infant health, and

⁵³⁶ Eula Hall, interview with author, March 2011.

⁵³⁷ In the January 1980 issue of *MS. Magazine*, Betty Jean Hall was named a "woman to watch," for her work with the Coal Employment Project. See also the portrait of a woman miner, "A Day in the Life of a Woman Miner," *MS. Magazine*, June 1981.

employment for local women.⁵³⁸ They were also part of an upsurge of women workers across the nation who used Title VII of the Civil Rights Act to push for greater economic independence. Organizations such as the Coal Employment Project and the Southeast Women's Employment Coalition saw Title VII as an opportunity to fundamentally alter the lives of working-class women, and they tackled a range of workplace issues, from low wages and sex segregation to sexual harassment. In the 1980s they led the labor movement in campaigning for unions to adopt family leave policies, which provided the path to national legislation in the form of the Family and Medical Leave Act signed by President Bill Clinton in 1996.⁵³⁹

Yet the struggle for equality has often been and remains a slog for women in the Mountain South. Even as they made gains in high-wage employment and in improved access to health care, new problems arose. They had always been a tiny fraction of the employed, and as the coal industry entered a long, slow death, coal mining proved to be an untenable career for women.⁵⁴⁰ Moreover, all blue-collar women and men have faced stagnating wages with the decline in U.S. manufacturing. As sociologist Leslie McCall has shown, while gender-specific tactics such as antidiscrimination law led to significant income gains for women at the top, “women’s absolute progress in the bottom half occurred in fits and starts.”⁵⁴¹ At the same time that the wage gap among women increased, the wages of blue-collar men stagnated, putting

⁵³⁸ See Hinsdale, et al, *It Comes From the People*, 169, 262-264; Interview with Marian Colette by Jessie Wilkerson, August 13, 2010, U-0479, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection; Kathy Rivel, interview with the author.

⁵³⁹ Marat Moore, *Women in the Mines: Stories of Life and Work* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), xlvii; June Rostan, interview with the author, July 6, 2009, U-0494, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection.

⁵⁴⁰ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 313. Moore includes a table of numbers of women hired in mines. Between 1973 and 1989, 3,965 women were hired out of 162,186 workers. New mining technologies along with industrial decline led to lay-offs in the early 1990s, and women have never regained the numbers they had in the industry. See also Susan E. Tallichet, *Daughters of the Mountain*, 7.

⁵⁴¹ Lisa McCall, “Increasing Class Disparities among Women,” ed. Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Sex of Class: Women Transforming American Labor*, (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2007), 31.

working-class families at greater financial risk. Leslie Lilly's call for "job equity and economic development" continues to resonate, as women now make up a large portion of the service sector, which is plagued by occupational sex segregation and low wages. McCall suggests strategies that take into account the downward mobility of both blue-collar men and women, gender discrimination, and rising inequality: these include federal policies such as a higher minimum wage and improved access to job training, education, and affordable family care.⁵⁴²

This narrative is not unique to Appalachia. In fact, the problems of rural and working-class women have become the norm for women across the country, as wages have failed to keep pace with inflation, income disparity has increased wildly, and the gaps in the social safety net have widened. Over the course of the 1980s, the dominant strands of the women's movement focused on the composition of the labor market rather than the ways that the structure of the economy produced inequality, and that focus ultimately benefitted professional and corporate women rather than working-class women. More than ever the stories of blue-collar, poor, and rural women matter. They underscore the importance of family leave policies, access to daycare, quality women's health care, occupational safety, a strong labor movement attuned to women's issues, and grassroots economic development programs. At the heart of the movement of Appalachian women was what one activist described as "economic and survival problems."⁵⁴³ Appalachian women's feminism was rooted in the class struggles that had characterized the history of the mountains in the twentieth century and built upon ongoing debates about economic injustice. Their struggles were never resolved. Indeed, they are now paramount for women across the country.

⁵⁴² McCall, 31-33.

⁵⁴³ Sally Maggard to Gail Falk, n.d., Box 70, Folder 26, CSM Records II.

EPILOGUE

On a chilly spring day in 2011, I drove up Highway 23, which slices through the mineral rich Cumberland Mountains. Snow-topped trees marched alongside the highway. In clearings houses stood slanted on the hills and family grave plots dotted the landscape. I was on my way to Prestonsburg, a sleepy town that boasts that it is home to mountain craft shops and fine country cooking. I arrived at a medical rehabilitation center, where I met Eula Hall. I had spent the previous few days talking with Hall's friends and co-workers. She wasn't well they said. She was suffering from kidney failure, she was unable to walk, and it was unlikely that the eighty-four year old would recover fully. But they told me I should still call her, for she would want to talk about her memories of the War on Poverty and her life's work, including the directorship of a community health clinic in the mountains of Kentucky. At the nursing home I found a woman who had clearly been very ill, but who was determined to recover. She said she had been doing hours of physical therapy and that she would do even more if the doctors would let her. Her goal was to go back to work at the Mud Creek Clinic, which she helped to found in 1973, building on nearly a decade of antipoverty work.

Over the next hour Eula Hall told me about her life. She grew up poor and quit school after finishing the eighth grade. She called the last day of school "the saddest day of my life." From an early age Hall learned an ethic of care from her mother, whom she called "the Good Samaritan." At seventeen, Hall married a handsome veteran who turned out to be brutally violent. With five children she could see no way out. She heard that some local women had been able to get jobs at the antipoverty programs that were just appearing in the mountains, and she

saw an opportunity to start her life fresh. The War on Poverty thrust her into a life of activism. Her most lasting legacy has been as the founder of the Mud Creek Clinic, which serves all comers regardless of ability to pay. The day I met with Eula she told me she was not ready to quit her work, despite her illness. She noted that the War on Poverty had changed many lives for the better, but she also acknowledged the need to strengthen and extend social welfare programs since the 2008 recession, stating, “If ever we needed a war on poverty, we need one now.”⁵⁴⁴

About a year after our first interview I returned to Floyd County and met Eula Hall in her office at the clinic, which had just been renamed the Eula Hall Health Center. It was her first day back at work, and she perched behind her desk, surrounded by hundreds of mementos and tokens of thanks given to her by patients. Over the course of our conversation she told me about a dream that she recently had: Local workers went on strike and she sensed that there was labor trouble; she showed up to the picket line to find that she was the only one there. She said, “I could see myself being alone, standing there, and I said, I’ll stand here until I die before I give up and let them do what they’re trying to do.”

People like Eula Hall have continued the work they began in the 1960s, winning many battles along the way. Yet as Hall’s dream suggests, the path has become lonelier as the War on Poverty has come to be seen as a colossal failure. By 1980, politicians who had staked their careers on opposition to federal antipoverty programs came into office, led by Ronald Reagan. They dismantled what they could (though less than is often assumed) and derided antipoverty programs as creating a dependent class and perpetuating poverty. If poverty persisted, they argued, then the War on Poverty had failed. Such an argument, built on an impossible measure, has obscured the legacies of 1960s antipoverty programs until recently.

⁵⁴⁴ Unless otherwise noted, drawn from Hall, interview with author, February 2011 and September 2012.

January 2014 marked the fiftieth anniversary of Lyndon B. Johnson's declaration of a War on Poverty, which CBS nightly news commemorated by featuring a story on Eula Hall and the clinic. Hall explained that the clinic that started out in a trailer now boasts modern facilities, including a dental clinic and pharmacy. With its food pantry and clothing shelter, it continues to buffer the community against the worst effects of poverty. The clinic has expanded to serve seven thousand people a year in a county where many are unable to afford adequate health care. What the newscast did not mention is that the clinic is one among dozens that opened with federal funding and through the hard work of antipoverty activists. Indeed, community health centers, which were first funded under the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, now serve about 20 million patients, with that number likely to double under the Affordable Care Act.⁵⁴⁵

Other women whose stories were captured in this study continued to organize at the grassroots level. Describing the impact of the War on Poverty on her life, Edith Easterling said, "It was an educational program for people like me. People won't be run over anymore like they used to be." The Appalachian Volunteers and other such programs had given people the confidence to speak up.⁵⁴⁶ Easterling served as Secretary and Vice-President of the Council of the Southern Mountains in 1970 and 1971. She was also on the board of the Highlander Research and Education Center, where she was a leading voice for a robust Appalachian Movement and economic justice. Throughout the 1970s she joined protests whenever they cropped up, especially around welfare rights, labor rights, and strip-mining. By the end of the 1970s, she and

⁵⁴⁵ See "Policy Brief: Improving Access to Medical Care and Health for Children and Adults," Russell Sage Foundation, https://www.russellsage.org/sites/all/files/legacies_wolfebrief_08232013.pdf. According to a recent report from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), 113 community health centers received federal funds in 2009 in the area designated as Appalachia by ARC, with ten of those centers in Kentucky. See "Community Health Centers in Appalachia Receiving ARRA Funds," http://www.arc.gov/noindex/newsroom/ARRA/webinars/04-01-2009/Community_Health_Centers_in_Appalachia_Receiving_ARRA_Funding.pdf.

⁵⁴⁶ Easterling, interview by Kinderman.

other strip-mining activists won a significant victory when President Carter signed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act. Yet new machinery and corporate consolidation transformed the coal industry, which established a practice of “mountain top removal,” or blasting mountains to get to coal beneath the ridges. The legacy of Edith’s environmental justice work continues in the new movement against mountain top removal.⁵⁴⁷

Along with its significant impact on individual women’s lives, the War on Poverty provided a platform for dozens of women to assert their visions of a better future. It set in motion a wave of organizing and inspired a host of community groups, from the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization to the Appalachian Women’s Rights Organization. And its networks were fundamental for the success of the Brookside Strike and working-class women’s organizations, such as the Coal Employment Project and the Southeast Women’s Employment Coalition.

My study suggests new measurements for evaluating the War on Poverty. First, we must consider what people went on to do. Energized by the War on Poverty’s emphasis on community action and the call for “maximum feasible participation” of the poor, local women made demands on local and state officials, making sure that antipoverty policies were implemented. The political educations they received and the coalitions they formed influenced decades of activism in the Mountain South, including movements for health care, welfare rights, environmental justice, and gender justice, and led to scores of non-profit organizations that seek to change policy to better serve the needs of people in rural and working-class communities. We

⁵⁴⁷ See Mountain Justice, http://mountainjustice.org/who_we_are/index.php; iLoveMountains.org, <http://ilovemountains.org/news>; and Statewide Community Organizing for eMpowerment (formerly Save Our Cumberland Mountains), <http://www.socm.org/>. For a history of the transition from strip-mining to mountain top removal, see Chad Montrie, *To Save the Land and People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 197-198.

also need to acknowledge the many antipoverty programs that still exist and that serve communities across the South. To say that the War on Poverty failed ignores the lasting institutions that have kept hundreds of people out of severe poverty, including food stamps, school lunches, and community health centers. While poverty still exists, it looks very different from the poverty of the 1960s, when communities in the Upland and Deep South lacked access to clean water, malnutrition was a significant problem, and many people had never seen a doctor.⁵⁴⁸ Today we have less dire poverty, but we have witnessed an increase in income inequality. How we remember the War on Poverty affects the policies that we institute today.⁵⁴⁹

Studies of local people who joined the War on Poverty have begun to dispel, as historian Annelise Orleck explains, “the cloud of negativity” that has continued to “color all of our perceptions about the feasibility and desirability of having the federal government spend taxpayer dollars to help poor people revitalize their communities.”⁵⁵⁰ I count myself among those who are challenging this narrative of defeat. As Johnson himself said, “no single weapon or strategy [would] suffice.” I argue that the War on Poverty was fought on many fronts, from welfare rights to community health and that, in Appalachia, women were instrumental in developing programs that have endured despite political attacks. Antipoverty initiatives relied on the grassroots work of volunteers and citizens, who won many battles and continue to fight for others. Those activists in turn benefited from policies that promoted leadership development and joint problem-solving in impoverished communities. When these stories are at the center, the War on Poverty and the history of women’s struggles for fairness appear more capacious and

⁵⁴⁸ Martha J. Bailey and Sheldon Danziger, “Legacies of the War on Poverty,” eds. Martha J. Bailey and Sheldon Danziger, *Legacies of the War on Poverty* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013), 1-36.

⁵⁴⁹ Orleck, “Conclusion,” *The War on Poverty*, 450-456.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

more useful as we face new, yet similar, battles over health care, the role of the social safety net in our society, and the growing problem of economic inequality.

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